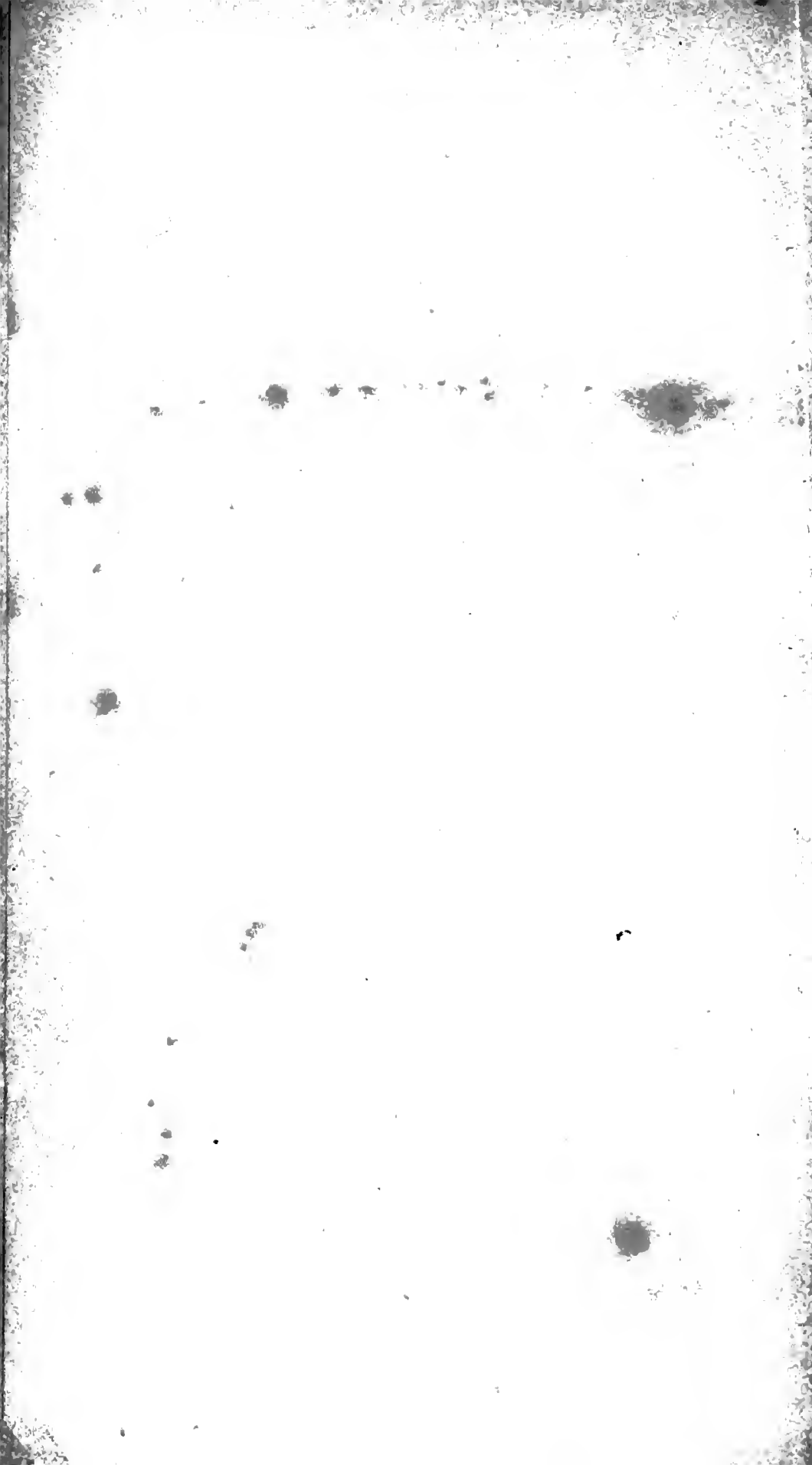


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THE
BROTHERS BASSET.

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“THE ENGLISH ENVOY AT THE COURT OF NICOLAS I.”

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THE BROTHERS BASSET.

CHAPTER I.

"CAB, sir?" vociferated the driver of one of those uncomfortable machines, which, nevertheless, in the present day must be classed among the absolute necessities of London life, and he checked his horse in the expectation of a fare. The inquiry was addressed to a young man of gentlemanly appearance, who was walking at a rapid pace along the Strand; and as he nodded assent, the vehicle drew up to the curbstone, when he opened the door himself, sprang in, and called out as he did so, "To Kensington, and drive like the devil, for I am late."

Calculating upon an extra shilling in virtue of this hint, the man set off at a reckless rate, utterly regardless of such facts as nursery maids with small children, or tottering old women, who might be crossing the road; yet, furiously as he drove, his speed hardly kept pace with the impatience of the passenger inside, who looked every minute or two at his watch, and seemed to be of opinion that cabs ought to be furnished with wings instead of wheels. "And they are so deucedly punctual at our house," he said to himself; "dinner is never half an hour behind time; confound that fellow Palmer! If I hadn't met with him, I should have been at home an hour ago—I certainly will give up billiards altogether, for I'm always getting into some scrape or other."

These and similar reflections occupied the mind of Charles Basset until the cab had passed the palace at Kensington, when he pulled the check-string, jumped out, and paid the man his demand, which, seeing that the gentleman was in a hurry and had no time to dispute with him, that conscientious person fixed at eighteen pence more than was his due. The young man walked on hastily towards a handsome house about a hundred yards distant, where he knocked at the door, while the cab-driver looked after him with a comical expression of face in which contempt and merriment were curiously blended; and having pocketed the proceeds of the late transaction with a considerable degree of satisfaction, he gave utterance to the following remarkable observation:—"What a flat!" In the meantime the door was opened by a servant in livery.

"Who are here, Barnes?" inquired his young master.

"Mr. and Mrs. Glanville, sir; Miss Kirby, Sir William and Mr. Ferndale, and Mrs. Heaviside."

"Not Major Gilmour?"

"No, sir! not yet."

"That's all right; now, tell them to bring some warm water to my room directly, for I'm confoundedly late."

On the stairs he met his father. "Why, Charles, what has kept you till this time? Do you know that it only wants a quarter to six?"

"Yes, sir! I know it; I shall be ready in a few minutes."

"You ought to have been ready before this. Pray make as much haste as you can; you have paid the insurance, of course?"

"The insurance? oh yes, sir, certainly. I shall be down almost directly." And so saying, he hastened to his own room to dress for dinner.

"The insurance!" he repeated to himself; "by heavens! I quite forgot it. Those confounded billiards, they make one forget everything. However, it will

be better not to tell my father, for it would make him uneasy perhaps, and I shall pay it the first thing in the morning before I go to the counting-house at all. It's deucedly unlucky though; I wish I hadn't met with Palmer, then it would have been done.—Well, it's no use thinking about it now—I shall make it all right to-morrow.” And so Charles dismissed the subject from his thoughts, and set about making his toilet for the dinner party, an employment that soon engrossed all his attention, as he was desirous of appearing to the best advantage on this particular occasion; and while he is thus engaged, it may be as well to say a few words respecting the family in which he played the distinguished part of eldest son.

Mr. Basset, the father, carried on an extensive wholesale business in one of those narrow streets or lanes branching from Cheapside, where his large, dark, dingy warehouses were stored with bales of valuable goods, consisting chiefly of the richest silks, velvets, and furs, imported from various parts of the world. The firm was formerly Cole and Basset; but, on the death of the chief partner, Mr. Basset took the whole concern upon himself with a view of giving his son a share in it; and Charles was at this very moment looking forward to the prospect of being in partnership with his father in the course of a few weeks. On the strength of this expectation, he had already begun to feel himself of more importance than he had hitherto been; and thereupon was building certain castles in the air which were destined to meet with the fate of most edifices of that description. It is a pity that this same castle-building should generally turn out so unprofitable an occupation, considering how much time is spent upon it, and how very pleasant it is until the downfall comes. Mr. Basset was a man about sixty, of reserved manners, few words, and grave but courteous deportment. His hair being nearly white, gave him the appearance of being much older than he really was, and his venerable mien, together with a habit of dressing always in

black, caused him very generally to be mistaken by strangers for a clergyman. His wife had for some years been a nervous invalid, incapable, or fancying herself so, of the slightest exertion, so that she had become a mere cipher in her own house, whilst all the domestic arrangements were entrusted to her eldest daughter Claudia, who, from the early age of sixteen, had been the real mistress of the establishment, and whose character had thereby acquired a serious and thoughtful turn, which formed an agreeable contrast to the light-hearted gaiety of her sister Emily, who was two years younger, the one being twenty, the other scarcely eighteen. They were extremely pretty, and generally believed to resemble each other, as both had that beautiful pale auburn hair which bears a golden tinge, large blue eyes, shaded with long lashes of a darker hue than the hair, and a fair transparent complexion; but Claudia was taller than her sister, her features were more regular, and the expression of her face was so pensive as sometimes to border on sadness, yet always gentle and pleasing; whereas Emily, whose natural vivacity had never received a check, was a laughter-loving damsel, seldom troubled with a serious thought; so that her brother frequently took occasion to say, and perhaps he was not very far from the truth, she was more merry than wise.

There was another son a year or two younger than Charles, but as he was away from home at this time it is unnecessary to say anything about him at present; and now let us proceed with the events of the day.

Mr. Charles Basset bestowed as much pains on his outward adornment as the short time he had allowed himself would admit of; and to judge from the complacency with which he surveyed himself in a large cheval glass when his toilet was completed, the result was satisfactory. He perfumed his fine cambric handkerchief, drew down his wristbands a little lower, took another survey of his person, and then descended to the drawing-room, where about fifteen or sixteen

persons were assembled, but it appeared from the hasty glance he cast around the circle that these were not all he had expected to see, and when he had paid as many compliments as politeness exacted he went close up to his youngest sister and whispered in her ear,—

“No disappointment about the Gilmours, is there, Emmy?”

“Oh, no—they are rather late, that’s all; but I know they are coming, for I saw Florence this morning.

“Did you? Where?”

“In Regent Street. We walked together for half an hour.”

“I wish I had been with you.”

“We did not want you, Charlie, for we went into two or three shops, and a gentleman is dreadfully in the way when one is shopping.”

“I don’t believe you, Emmy; I’m quite sure you never think a gentleman in the way.”

“How very conceited you are, sir—I shall tell Florence of that pretty speech.”

“It was not meant for her,” said Charles, “and I beg—”

But here he was interrupted; for at that moment the door was thrown wide open by Barnes, who announced in an extra loud voice,—

“Major and Miss Gilmour!”

And the major entered the room with rather a stately air, his beautiful daughter hanging on his arm. He was a tall, aristocratic looking man, with that yellow complexion which is so generally the effect of a long residence in India; but his daughter was a very handsome and remarkably elegant girl, with a bright animated countenance, lighted up by the most superb dark eyes imaginable. Her white, exquisitely moulded arms were displayed to great advantage by the short sleeves of the rich ruby velvet dress she wore; whilst her fair forehead was an admirable contrast to the dark glossy hair that was braided over it, and fell in long ringlets behind.

Charles Basset's eyes sparkled with pleasure as he advanced to lead her to a seat; and when dinner was announced, he gave her his arm, and seated himself next to her at the table.

CHAPTER II.

MAJOR GILMOUR was the younger son of a Scottish family, of noble origin but poor estate. He was distantly related by marriage to the Bassets; and some five-and-twenty years ago, when he was only a young subaltern officer with nothing but his pay to subsist upon, Mr. Basset, although full ten years older, was his most intimate friend, and being the richer of the two, Arthur Gilmour had often been indebted to him for relief from such pecuniary embarrassments as young men with high notions and scanty means are very apt to fall into. He had a vast deal of that sort of pride which is the unwholesome fruit of the genealogical tree, and was fond of tracing his ancestry, though in an indirect line, to the great Earls of Douglas, who held all but sovereign power in Scotland at one period of its eventful history. Nevertheless he had to seek his own fortune in the world, and on the death of his father, with the few hundreds that constituted his share of the inheritance, he purchased a commission in a cavalry regiment that was going to India. Before his departure, however, he fell in love with, and married, a beautiful girl, who had come from some distant part of the country on a visit to her cousin, Mrs. Basset, who had not long been a wife herself, and the marriage was celebrated at Mr. Basset's house, and at his cost. It was his liberality, too, that furnished the bride with everything requisite for her voyage, and thus far Arthur Gilmour was under obligations to his friend, for which, at that time, it was not in his power to make any return. On his arrival at Calcutta, he met with his elder brother, who had, for several years, held a

lucrative appointment under the Government, and was already a man of some wealth and importance; but as Arthur's regiment was ordered to a distant station, they had not the opportunity of spending much time together. Once, soon after the birth of Florence, her uncle paid a visit to that part of the country where she first opened her eyes upon the world, and again he came there when she was about six years old, and that was the last time the two brothers ever saw each other.

Fifteen years had passed away since Arthur Gilmour first set his foot on the plains of India, and he had now attained to the rank of major; his wife was dead, his daughter growing up to womanhood, and his own health beginning to suffer materially from the effects of the climate. In consequence of the latter circumstance, and for the sake of his daughter's education, he became very anxious to return to Europe, and was thinking of getting leave for a temporary absence, when, by the sudden death of his brother, he unexpectedly found himself in a condition to retire from the army altogether, and he gladly availed himself of it, as he had never had much taste for a military career, except as being the most gentlemanly profession a poor man could follow with any chance of success.

Mr. Gilmour, who had never married, died a rich man; much richer, indeed, than the major had any idea of until he received the news of his death, and his will, both at the same time. To say that Major Gilmour did not regret the loss of his brother, would be to do him great injustice. As boys they had loved each other; and although separated by circumstances in after-life, the feeling of fraternal affection had never become extinct in either. They seldom met; but whenever they did meet, it was as brothers, not as strangers; and for a time Major Gilmour lamented sincerely the death of his only near relative, and vainly wished he had been with him in his last hour; nevertheless his sorrow did not render him wholly

insensible to the gratification of finding himself so unexpectedly in possession of considerable wealth; and as Florence was now a great heiress, he began to think it high time she should be instructed by able masters, in such accomplishments as were befitting a young lady in that position, and he hastened his departure accordingly. Having placed his daughter at a first-rate school in the vicinity of Paris, he spent some years in visiting different parts of the Continent, sojourning by turns in most of the principal capitals; and, at length, when Florence had completed her school education, he returned to England, and settled permanently in London, where he took a handsome house in Belgrave Square, furnished it in a costly manner, and lived in the style of a man of fortune.

Florence Gilmour was now in her twentieth year, handsome, lively, and accomplished. Her father, who since his accession to his brother's wealth, had given the rein to his natural disposition, which was proud, ambitious, and arbitrary, looked upon his daughter's attractions as the means whereby his family might be ennobled, and his own consequence increased. With the blood of the Douglasses in his veins, and an ample share of the wealth of the Indies in his pockets, he considered his heiress a suitable match for a man of high rank, and looked forward to secure by such an alliance a title that would descend to his grandchildren and their posterity; but Florence remained in happy ignorance of this scheme of aggrandisement, as he did not think it necessary to explain his views and sentiments until an opportunity should offer of realising them. The world gave Major Gilmour credit for being an affectionate and indulgent father; for what has the world to judge from, with regard to family affection, but those outward manifestations that are so often only the silken veil that conceals unpleasing features? There was, in truth, but little of parental tenderness in his ceremonious attentions, and the extreme liberality with

which he supplied her purse, and surrounded her with every luxury that money could procure—for these were not offerings to the child of his love, but to the being on whom the future dignity of his house depended.

Florence, on her part, always behaved towards her father with becoming respect, and never acted in direct opposition to his will; but the haughty, overbearing manners he had acquired during his military career, although somewhat tempered by the habits and feelings of a gentleman, were so repellent, that very few people could feel on easy and familiar terms with him, and even his daughter experienced the chilling effect of his usual demeanour to a degree that prevented her from treating him with that loving confidence a father might naturally look for from his only child. But to this he was either insensible or indifferent; and so long as she attended to his wishes, forbore to irritate him by contradiction, and ministered to his pride by the elegance of her appearance and manners, he seemed to desire nothing more.

No sooner was Mr. Basset made aware, by the public prints, that his former friend had returned, than he hastened to welcome him back to his native land; but he soon discovered that the wealthy major was a very different person from the needy lieutenant he had so often befriended in former years, and that they could never again be on the same familiar terms that had marked their earlier intimacy. The military commander evidently felt, and intended to assert, by manner at least, his superiority over the man of trade, such distinctions being now of the highest importance in his eyes; and, although the intercourse between them was renewed to a certain extent, there was always a degree of ceremony and condescending politeness in the major's manner whenever he entered Mr. Basset's house, that seemed to say, "I am doing you honour."

With Florence, however, the case was altogether different, for she knew the Bassets were her mother's

relations, and was delighted to find in the gentle Claudia and the lively Emily companions exactly suited to her taste; therefore, notwithstanding the repeated hints of the major, that, although he wished to show a proper degree of civility to the family, there was no necessity to keep up a very close intimacy, he could neither prevent nor control the affection with which the cousins, for such they considered themselves, soon learned to regard each other.

It was not more than three months after Major Gilmour's settlement in that fashionable suburb of the metropolis before mentioned, when he condescended to accept an invitation to dine at Kensington, and this was the occasion of the large party now assembled at the house of Mr. Basset.

CHAPTER III.

THE dinner was over, and the ladies had returned to the drawing-room, where, in the absence of the gentlemen, some of them sought to beguile the time by sundry animadversions on the conduct of one or other of their mutual friends not then and there present.

Amongst the pattern people who thus virtually set up their own claims to perfection by passing censure on all sorts of faults and follies appertaining unto others, was a certain widow of an uncertain age named Heaviside, whose dress and manners indicated a decided taste for appearing on the right side of forty, and a no less decided distaste for the melancholy state of loneliness into which she had been plunged by the demise of her late lord some fifteen months since.

Her residence was in Hampshire, but she had come to town to settle some law business connected with her husband's will, and had brought with her a dependent niece, Alice Compton, whose presence was required as a witness, and who had been kindly in-

cluded in the invitation to dine at Kensington on the day in question. Poor Alice would, perhaps, rather have remained alone at the hotel where they were staying, but her aunt insisted on her going, and she had no choice but to comply. She had the appearance of being about thirty years of age, but, in point of fact, was not above five or six and twenty at most, the homeliness of her features, and shabbiness of her dress, making her look older than she really was. The gown she wore was an old black silk that had formed a part of her aunt's wardrobe at some remote period of its history, but it was the best gown Miss Compton possessed, and not feeling quite at her ease amongst a number of people fashionably and elegantly attired, she had taken up her position in the most obscure corner of the room, where, for a time, she sat unobserved, but not unobserving; a quiet spectator of the scene rather than an actor in it.

We are sometimes told that it is wrong to judge by outward appearances, and, certainly, in the case of Mrs. Heaviside, it would have been very wrong indeed, for no one would have guessed, by any such tokens, that she was a widow at all, and far less could it have been surmised that her bereavement was of such recent date. There was not even a plain gauze lappet, or a vestige of white crape, to intimate the fact, but the cap worn by the relict of the late Josiah Heaviside presented a marvellous combination of gay flowers, coloured ribbons and blond, that would no doubt have been extremely mortifying to the said Josiah could he have seen them. The dress, too, that accompanied this splendid head-gear was very becoming to Mrs. Heaviside, not in her capacity of widow, for it was a yellow richly-brocaded satin; but, as a fair dame with flaxen ringlets, it suited her remarkably well. Now, whether these ringlets were her own by the gift of Nature, or by right of purchase, it matters not; as, in either case, they assisted in making up a very agreeable tout ensemble, and although they might be waved, now and then, with

mischievous intent before the eyes of unwary bachelors, the gentle waves of such graceful appendages are very pleasant waves for a bachelor's peace of mind to be wrecked upon

On the day in question their whole force had been directed, during the progress of the dinner, against Sir William Ferndale, a city knight, and the father of Frank Ferndale, the affianced husband of Claudia Basset. Sir William, who happened to be seated next to the widow, had paid her the most particular attention, inasmuch as he was greatly entertained by some peculiar ideas and opinions expressed by the lady, which betrayed a state of mind that ill-natured people might have called ignorant—good-natured ones, unsophisticated. Sir William, being one of those men who enjoy a joke at other people's expense, had taken some pains to draw the widow out, and in so doing had discovered that she had a vast deal of imagination with a very small amount of knowledge, consequently he thought proper to amuse himself by playing upon her credulity, and she left the table with a firm conviction that he was the most polite and well-informed man she had ever met with.

"What a delightful creature that Sir William Ferndale is, my dear!" she said to Emily Basset. "What an intellectual mind he has!"

"Has he?" said Emily, laughing. "Well, as that is rather an extraordinary species of mind, I shall make a point of studying it at my leisure."

But Mrs. Heaviside's enthusiasm received a check at a later period in the evening, for she was Sir William's partner at a whist-table, and being, perhaps, not quite so cool and self-possessed as when playing with three dowagers in a country town, she made several grievous blunders by which the odd trick was lost in three successive deals, and as her partner was betting half-crowns with his adversary, he lost his temper, looked black as thunder, and made some remarks that were anything but complimentary.

In the meantime Charles Basset was offering up his devotions at the shrine of the beautiful heiress, who began to suspect he was meditating a declaration that she was anxious to avoid, and was rather desirous of sparing him the pain of being rejected, by making him aware, indirectly, that such would be the result. Not that she disliked him, for he had many estimable and agreeable qualities, but there was nothing sufficiently striking in his character to touch the heart of a girl like Florence Gilmour; who, nevertheless, had too much regard for Charles to treat him with coldness or disdain, and as he was quite enough in love to build a vast structure of hope upon a very slight foundation, he had drawn conclusions, or at least strong inferences, from the kindness of her manner, that were entirely groundless. On this evening she was especially careful not to afford him the least opportunity of saying anything definite; but this was somewhat difficult, and once he was very near touching upon the momentous question, for as he was leaning over the back of Emily's chair looking at a drawing she was showing to Miss Gilmour, she suddenly said in her playful manner,—

“Do you know, Florence, Charles is growing intolerably conceited: for when I told him we did not want him with us this morning, he said he knew better.”

“Nay, keep to the truth, Emily. Did I say I knew better?”

“Something very like it, Charlie.”

“Indeed, Miss Gilmour, I neither thought nor said anything so impertinent.”

“Pray, Mr. Charles, what did you say?” she inquired.

At this moment Mrs. Basset, who, as usual, was reclining on a couch complaining of heat and fatigue, beckoned to Emily, who ran to her immediately, when her brother took the seat she had vacated, and replied in a low voice to Florence's last question,—

“What I said is not worth repeating; what I thought I should be only too happy to have permission to tell you.”

She instantly rose, saying gaily, “But I am not inclined to listen to anything just now but that very pretty song Mr. Ferndale is singing so sweetly.” And she walked towards the piano, followed by Charles, who looked and felt disappointed.

Frank Ferndale, a tall, handsome, dashing young man, was gifted with a fine voice, and, moreover, usually sang with much taste and feeling, and with the pleasant smile of one who is secure of admiration; but, on the present occasion, he did not appear to be in a very good humour, and this was the cause. Claudia had observed that Miss Compton was sitting in a corner neglected and forlorn; therefore, as soon as she could find leisure to bestow a few minutes upon her, she took a seat by her side and said,—

“I am afraid, Miss Compton, you will not be able to find amusement among so many strangers. Do you play or sing?”

The poor dependant, unaccustomed to any sort of attention, looked more surprised than pleased, thinking, probably, that the question had in it less of kindness than sarcasm; but the gentleness of Claudia's tone and manner soon set her at ease, and she answered that she could do neither.

“I hope, then, you are fond of music, as that is the only entertainment we can give you to-night.”

“I like some music, but I dare say it is such as is quite out of fashion, and would be laughed at here.”

“Oh, we are not very fashionable folks, I assure you; and if I knew what would suit your taste, I dare say some of us would be able to gratify you.”

“And would anybody here sing to gratify me!” said the poor girl, looking round incredulously on the rich silks, satins, and velvets, and then on her own shabby black.

Claudia understood the feeling, and wishing to relieve it, replied, “Certainly, I should expect that

any one would be happy to do so, as you are the only stranger in the room. Is there any song you would like particularly to hear?"

"My mother used to sing many pretty Scotch ballads. I have never heard one since."

The eyes of the speaker filled with tears as she said these words, which seemed to awaken some painful remembrance; yet she smiled too with looks of grateful pleasure, when Claudia requested she would mention the song she would like best to hear, and with some hesitation named 'Roy's Wife.'

"Mr. Ferndale sings Scotch songs very nicely," said Claudia, "and I will ask him for that directly;" and going to Frank, who was lounging idly on a sofa, she whispered,—“I wish you would sing 'Roy's Wife'—and I will accompany you."

"Roy's Wife!" he repeated with the utmost astonishment—"What on earth for?"

"It is to please Miss Compton—she has had so little amusement this evening that it makes me quite uncomfortable."

"Which is Miss Compton?"

"Mrs. Heaviside's niece—there—in black—near the door."

"What—that queer looking old maid? Surely you don't mean that I am to sing an antiquated Scotch song, and get myself laughed at, to please her?"

"You run no risk of being laughed at, Frank; for however antiquated the song may be, your manner of singing it makes it always delightful."

"Well, if you command it, of course I am bound to obey," he said, rising with evident reluctance; "but I must confess it is a little outrageous to expect me to sing an ancient ditty for the entertainment of such an article as that!"—and he glanced contemptuously towards the unconscious object of his sarcasm.

Claudia looked grave—she felt displeased—for she could not help seeing there was a selfishness and want of good feeling in the conduct of Mr. Ferndale on

this trivial occasion, that augured ill for her future happiness as depending on him; and this was the first moment she had found reason to be dissatisfied with her handsome, accomplished lover. However, he sang the song, though with rather an ill grace, and her benevolent purpose was answered—more fully answered, indeed, than she was herself aware of. It seemed a mere trifle; but who can estimate the real value of such trifles except those to whom kind attentions are unfamiliar things! The slighted dependant felt that something had been done for her—that she had been treated, probably for the first time in her life, as a guest whose entertainment was to be cared for—and the unwonted pleasure springing from this simple circumstance imparted a warmth to her heart, and a lightness to her spirits, she had not experienced for many a year. She never forgot it.

One more incident of this memorable evening has yet to be recorded. There was a remarkably handsome young military officer, an intimate friend of Charles Basset, but a stranger to the rest of the family, who had been asked to join the party in the evening, and accordingly made his appearance about ten o'clock, when he was introduced by Charles to his mother and sisters as ensign Claverton of the Nineteenth. He seemed quite enchanted by the youthful beauty and lively manners of Emily Basset, and took occasion to say to Charles,—

“By Jove, Basset, your sister is the loveliest Hebe that ever dazzled the eyes of a poor unlucky fellow like me, with a gold epaulette, and an empty pocket!”

Charles laughed, and told him he had better take care of himself, as Emily was an incorrigible flirt; and, on this hint, the handsome ensign devoted his whole attention to her during the rest of the evening, and she was nothing loth to receive it.

CHAPTER IV.

CHARLES BASSET retired to rest that night not quite satisfied with the result of his first experiment on the heart of the eastern beauty. She had evidently evaded a more explicit avowal of his sentiments, consequently she must have known or at least suspected what he was going to say. Whether this was, or was not, a discouraging circumstance he could not exactly determine in his own mind, but he inclined to the latter opinion. She did not dislike him—he was pretty sure of that—and, in fact, he saw no particular reason why she should; therefore he succeeded at last in quieting his own apprehensions, and fell asleep. Still the train of thought did not stop, but it went on in utter defiance of order and reason.

He dreamed that he was walking with Florence in a quiet grove, urging his suit, to which she seemed to listen kindly, when, on a sudden, the scene changed to the interior of a gloomy church, where they stood before the altar in almost total darkness, while the priest read the marriage ceremony. As he closed his book the church became illuminated by a glare of red light, streaming in at all the windows; the bells began to ring with loud discordant sounds, the beating of

drums was heard outside, and deafening shouts were raised by the mob to hail the newly-married pair.

He awoke and started up in affright, for these sounds were no fiction of the brain, but the drums and church bells of his dream were in reality a violent knocking and ringing at the house-door. The servants from the windows above were calling out to the people in the street, and amidst the incoherent jargon of questions and answers that met his ear, Charles plainly distinguished the word "Fire!"

Terribly alarmed, he wrapped his dressing-gown round him, thrust his feet hastily into his slippers, and rushing down the stairs met his father just coming out of his own room. By this time the street door had been opened, and there was a great confusion of voices in the hall.

"For God's sake, Davis, what's the matter?" said Mr. Basset to a man who was coming up the stairs hurriedly, and whom he recognised as one of his own city porters.

"The warehouses are on fire, sir," replied the man, panting for breath; "the engines were hard at work when I came away, but the flames had got ahead then, and I'm afraid the place can't be saved."

Mr. Basset's first impulse was to exclaim, "Thank God the insurance is paid!"

"It is not paid!" cried Charles, clasping his hands wildly. "My father—my father, I have ruined you!"

The unfortunate man heard only the first words, which came upon him like a death blow; he staggered back a few paces, uttered a deep groan, and fell senseless upon the floor.

The two sisters, pale and trembling, half dressed, with shawls wrapped about them, now appeared; and, thinking the house was on fire, anxiously inquired if their mother was safe.

"The fire is not here, miss," said Barnes, speaking to Claudia; "it is in the city."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed both the girls at

once, very much relieved, and little dreaming that the calamity was infinitely greater as it was; for Mr. Basset, being a dilatory man, seldom doing that to-day which might be put off till to-morrow, had delayed paying the premium on his insurance for thirty thousand pounds till the very last day allowed by the company beyond that when the term expired, and then, as he did not happen to be going into the city himself, he gave his son a check for the amount, desiring him to call and pay it. Charles forgot to do so, and thus the policy had become void.

"See to your father, Claudia," said Charles, pointing to the old man who was still lying insensible on the floor, and in the partial darkness had been unobserved until this moment, when one of the servants was endeavouring to raise him in her arms. His terrified daughters assisted in carrying him back to his bed, whilst Charles, scarcely knowing what he did, flew down the stairs and out of the house, but before he had gone many yards he was stopped by Barnes, who, having heard what had passed, guessed how the case stood, and followed his young master in the fear that he might commit some act of desperation.

"Where are you going, Mr. Charles?" he asked.

"To the city—why do you ask me, Barnes? I must go—there is no time to be lost."

"But you must not go out so, sir. Come back to your room and let me help you to dress yourself—Davis, you can run and find a cab for Mr. Charles, and go with him into the city."

And the goodnatured footman, half by persuasion, half by force, succeeded in getting him back into the house, and assisted him to dress.

All this time he did not speak a single word, except to mutter to himself now and then, "Oh, God! this is dreadful!" to which the man soothingly responded,—

"Don't take on so, sir—it mayn't be so bad as you think, after all."

A cab was speedily procured, and the miserable young man, attended by the porter, took his way towards the scene of destruction. And oh! what a scene it was for him. The frightful glare of the flames that were still furiously raging; the dense clouds of smoke; the streams of water pouring through the narrow streets; the hoarse shouts of the firemen, the roar of the engines, and the din of the mob trying to force its way, in spite of the police, nearer to the burning pile; all these were horrible sights and sounds for one who knew they were the harbingers of inevitable ruin wrought by his own neglect.

"You cannot pass," said a policeman to the driver of the cab.

"He must pass," replied the porter on the box. "It is Mr. Basset."

At this intimation way was made, and the vehicle was allowed to proceed, but it could not get far down the street, which was blocked up by the engines, therefore Charles got out and made his way, followed by the porter, to the spot where his father's warehouses had stood, for, alas! they were standing no longer, and the efforts of the firemen were now directed towards the preservation of the adjoining buildings, from which quantities of goods were being removed in haste and confusion. But of all Mr. Basset's valuable stock, not a single bale had been saved from the flames—the wreck was awful and complete. Charles gazed with mute horror on the melancholy spectacle, and in the frenzy of despair, could scarcely be withheld from rushing into the midst of the burning ruins, with a vague idea that something might still be saved; and once a fearful idea crossed his mind that he might avoid the sight of the misery he had brought upon the family, by putting an end to his own existence. But this was only a passing thought, for the evil spirit that prompts men in their moments of weakness, to defy the laws of God and man, and presumptuously force their way to

the judgment-seat uncalled for and unprepared, was instantly subdued by a still small voice that whispered to his heart, "Do not add guilt to error, nor increase your father's sorrows by selfishly terminating your own."

In about half an hour Barnes arrived with a message from his master, requesting that Charles would go home directly.

"Does my father know this?" said Charles, pointing mournfully to the ruins. Does he know that everything is destroyed?"

"Yes, sir; one of the men had come to tell him so just before I started."

"I cannot go home, Barnes; I dare not."

"Oh! Mr. Charles—don't talk so, sir—you can do no good by staying here; and to give way in this manner is only making bad worse. Come, sir, come away—let me take you home—you will be better there, I am sure."

Charles was at length, with some difficulty, prevailed upon to return; but, instead of going to his father, he went to his own room and sent for Claudia, who was yet but imperfectly acquainted with the extent of the calamity that had befallen them. Mr. Basset had never been in the habit of saying much about his affairs to his wife and daughters, who, in common with the rest of the world, believed him to be a rich man; but this was not the fact; for the whole of his capital, as Charles well knew, was embarked in trade, and he had for many years lived up to the very extent of the income derived from it, which was about two thousand a-year. The stock had been always insured for thirty thousand pounds; but even this sum would not have been sufficient to cover the present loss; for it unfortunately happened that a fresh importation of goods from Lyons had been cleared from the Custom House only a few days before, and Mr. Basset had intended, in consequence, to effect a separate insurance in another office for ten

thousand pounds ; but, with his usual tardiness, he had put it off from day to day, and the evil was now without remedy.

Claudia could not altogether conceal the shock she felt, on learning now, for the first time, the true state of her father's circumstances. She saw plainly there was nothing to save him from absolute ruin, yet she made an effort to suppress her own feelings as much as possible, and tried by every gentle argument that affection could suggest, to console her brother and reconcile him to himself. At length daylight began to appear, when Charles, exhausted with fatigue and violent emotions, consented to try and take some rest ; and when Claudia had left him for that purpose, he threw himself on the bed without undressing, and soon fell into a deep sleep, from which he did not awake for several hours.

CHAPTER V.

THERE are few sensations more exquisitely painful than that of awaking, under distressing circumstances, from a temporary oblivion of our sorrows, to the returning consciousness of their reality. How, for a moment, do we cling to the hope that all may have been but a dream; and what a sickening of the heart there comes as that hope fades into nothingness!

It was past eleven o'clock when Charles awoke with a confused idea that something terrible had happened, but his brain was still haunted by an indistinct recollection of his previous dream, which so mingled itself with the frightful events of the night, that the whole seemed for an instant to be but the illusion of a troubled sleep; but, as the fatal truth forced itself upon his mind in all its sad certainty, he buried his face in the pillow and wept bitterly. From this state he was aroused by Claudia, who came to the bedside, and spoke to him softly,—

“Dear Charles, will you not come down and have some breakfast?”

“No, I cannot; I want nothing.”

“But, indeed, you must take something. Shall I bring you a cup of coffee here?”

To this he assented, and while she was gone he got

up, washed his hands and face, and put on his usual morning dress. By the time he had done all this, Claudia returned with some coffee and toast, which he did not refuse; for he really stood in need of some refreshment, although he could not bear the thought of appearing at the breakfast table.

"Where is my father?" he inquired, in a trembling voice.

"He is in the dining-room, and you must go to him presently, for he wishes to see you."

"Oh, Claudia! that is what I dread."

"You need not, Charles; for he is too kind and just, I am sure, to make a crime of an act of forgetfulness, and that is the worst that can be said of it, however serious its consequences may be."

"No, Claudia, it is not the worst that can be said. I told him the money was paid, and I deserve his reproaches for the lie as well as for the neglect."

"Even that was in some degree excusable," said the gentle girl, "and your father knows you would not have deceived him from any other motive than to save him from useless anxiety."

Charles sighed deeply, and asked how his mother had borne the shock.

Claudia said she was very much indisposed, but was afraid to tell him how seriously she was affected, fearing that it would make him still more reluctant to see his father; and she hoped that when that dreaded meeting was once over, he would recover his composure, and be able to contemplate with fortitude the evils that must inevitably follow the last night's awful catastrophe.

After much persuasion, he at length summoned courage to go down stairs, but stood for some time with his hand on the handle of the dining-room door, before he could find resolution to open it; however, he knew that, sooner or later, the dreaded interview must take place; and, after a painful struggle with his own feelings, he entered the room.

Mr. Basset was alone, sitting in an attitude of profound thought, with his eyes fixed on the ground; but, on hearing the door opened, he looked up, and seeing his son, held out his hand with a faint smile. Poor Charles rushed forward, and throwing himself at his feet, exclaimed wildly,—

“Oh, my father! do not curse me!”

The unfortunate man, overcome with emotion, burst into tears; and putting his hand on his son's head, as in the act of pronouncing a blessing, said in a tone of deep feeling,—

“No, Charles, no. God knows your punishment will be heavy enough, my poor boy, without that. No, no; ruin may come—death may come. I will bear it all as I may; but I will never curse my son.”

Kindness is sometimes harder to bear than reproaches; and while his heart acknowledged with gratitude the forbearance of his indulgent parent, the self accuser felt that it would add to the bitterness of his own remorse; and, covering his face with his hands, sobbed aloud. The father and son remained together during the greater part of that miserable morning; and it is strange to say, that the former, who, it might naturally have been supposed, stood most in need of consolation, was the one to administer it. Again and again did he assure Charles of his perfect forgiveness, and never, perhaps, had the tie of affection been stronger between them than it was now. In the meantime Claudia and Emily were fully occupied with their mother, who had never once spoken since the fatal words reached her ear, that announced her husband's total ruin. The doctor, who constantly attended her, on calling that morning, said that she was suffering under a slight stroke of paralysis, from which she would probably rally in the course of a day or two; but it was evident from his manner, that he had grave doubts on the subject. This, however, was carefully concealed from Charles, who was told that, as Mr. Saunders

recommended his mother should be kept particularly quiet, he had better not go in to see her; and he was glad to be spared, for that day at least, what he feared would be a very painful scene. In the course of the morning many cards were left, and notes of condolence sent by people who had not the smallest suspicion of the revolution that had taken place in Mr. Basset's affairs; for if the truth had been generally known, it is very possible that such tokens of sympathy would have been less numerous.

Barnes had received positive orders to admit no visitors, on the plea that his mistress was seriously indisposed; and this excuse had been made to several callers; but, about three o'clock, a neat close carriage, driven by a man in livery, stopped at the door, and the coachman gave in a card, on which was inscribed "Mr. George Ingleby," at the same time inquiring if Mr. Basset was at home. Barnes gave the same answer he had given to others, but the gentleman in the carriage said that he had called on business of great importance, and wished that Mr. Basset should be informed he was there, and he should be glad to see him for a few minutes. Barnes returned instantly, and said his master would be happy to see Mr. Ingleby; on which the gentleman alighted, and was ushered into the dining-room, where Charles and his father were still together. The visitor walked straight up to Mr. Basset, with looks expressive of the deepest concern, and, as he shook his hand with friendly warmth, said,—

"Why, Basset—what is the meaning of all this that I hear? What, on earth, can be the reason you have let the time run out? Surely, there must be some mistake about it—you never could be so mad!"

"There has been a mistake, indeed," Mr. Basset replied, sadly; "and I am afraid the error cannot now be rectified."

"But how did it arise? Is it on your part, or ours?"

"It is on mine, sir," said Charles, coming forward. "My father trusted to me, and I neglected to make the payment,"

Mr. Ingleby turned abruptly towards him with a severe look, intending to utter some very harsh rebuke; but the moment he cast his eyes on the face of the penitent, all his anger was lost in compassion, and he only said, "Young gentleman, I am sorry for you." But the tone of heartfelt pity in which these words were uttered was too much for poor Charles, who rushed out of the room, while his father murmured to himself, "Poor Charles! poor fellow!"

Mr. Ingleby, who was one of the directors of the Fire Office where Mr. Basset's property had been insured, had come to him for the benevolent purpose of seeing whether there was any ground for claiming the benefit of the policy that had been so carelessly forfeited; but when he heard the particulars he shook his head, saying, there certainly could be no legal claim, although it was his own opinion that, as Mr. Basset had given his son the money before the expiration of the term, it ought to be considered that he had in fact paid it; but this, he confessed, was a point of honour, not law, and might be withstood. However, his advice was, that an appeal should be made to the Board of Directors, and he promised to use all his influence in support of it.

"I know some of them are hard men," he said, "but we must try them, at any rate; and if we can only get a majority in our favour, all may be well yet."

Mr. Basset was not very sanguine as to the success of such an application; but he fully appreciated the kindness of his friendly adviser, who, after a little more conversation, took his leave with a cordiality that seemed to say, he did not intend that the intimacy thus begun should drop here, for although he had long known Mr. Basset in business, this was the first time he had ever been in his house, and he was unacquainted with any of his family.

Mr. Ingleby had not been long gone when Frank

Ferndale knocked at the door, and was walking in, as usual, without ceremony, when he was stopped by Barnes, who said,—

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I think you had better not go in.”

“Not go in—why?”

“My mistress is very bad, sir, and the young ladies can’t leave her; and my master and Mr. Charles don’t see anybody.”

“Anybody—I suppose that means any strangers; but it cannot have anything to do with me, I should think.”

“Well, sir, I don’t know—that was my orders. Master is almost beside himself, and Mr. Charles is just like any one distracted; so, sir, excuse me, but I think you had better not see them to-day.”

“But I must see somebody, Barnes, for I cannot understand all this. A fire is a very unfortunate thing of course; but why it is to drive everybody distracted, I really do not comprehend.”

“Well, sir, I suppose there will be no harm in mentioning it to you, though I have not said a syllable of the matter to any one else; but I fancy Mr. Charles forgot to pay up the insurance, and the fire office people won’t pay the damage, and so my master will lose everything.”

Frank was thunderstruck. He knew that the loss in this case must be enormous, and saw at once how materially his own interests were involved in the startling intelligence.

“Good God!” he involuntarily exclaimed; “that is a serious affair, indeed. Say I called, Barnes, will you; and that I will look in again in the evening—if I can.” And he hurried off to the city to make further inquiries.

In the evening he received a note from Claudia requesting that he would absent himself for a few days, and he was by no means unwilling to avail himself of this respite.

Among the notes that day received was one from Florence Gilmour, addressed to Emily, written apparently in haste, and without any knowledge of what had happened. These were its contents:—

“MY DEAR EMILY,

“My father has just received a letter which obliges him to set off for Edinburgh immediately; and as it is his will and pleasure that I shall accompany him, he has given the word of command for me to pack up and be in readiness to march by twelve o'clock, so that I have only just time to let you know of this hasty movement, which will account for my not calling on you to-day as I promised. I hope we shall not be absent more than three or four weeks at the most; but I understand we are to pay a visit on our way to Brianscourt, the seat of Lord Merrington, an old friend of my father, and, I should imagine from all I hear about him, rather a rough specimen of English nobility. He has been in the navy, and is the uncle of that Captain Romer whom I so much dislike. I half suspect that Major Gilmour has some latent motive of ambition in choosing to make this visit when I am with him; but, if so, I shall take especial care to counteract his designs. I cannot tell you where to write to me, as I am unacquainted with our precise destination; so adieu for the present, dearest Emily,

“Your very affectionate,

“FLORENCE GILMOUR.”

The lively strain of this epistle was in sad discordance with the feelings of poor Emily, who read it as she sat with tearful eyes by the bedside of her grief-stricken mother.

“I must not show this to Charles,” she said to herself, “for he will have to give up all thoughts of Florence now.”

Then she began to reflect on the probable conse-

quences to herself and her sister of such a sudden reverse of fortune ; but it is difficult for those who have never known privation, to realise it to themselves until it is actually seen and felt ; and so long as she beheld around her the luxuries to which she had ever been accustomed, the want of them was an abstruse idea that scarcely took the form of anything real. Neither did she contemplate the cold looks, the altered tones, that add to the bitterness of fallen fortunes ; a hard lesson to learn at any period of our existence, but hardest of all in the spring time of life, ere the “*couleur de rose*” that makes the world so bright and beautiful has been darkened by the clouds of experience.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR WILLIAM FERNDALÉ was a wine-merchant, in easy but not affluent circumstances; and his family consisted of three sons, the eldest of whom, Frank, had lately entered for the bar, and was in a fair way of rising rapidly, as his family connections were such as were likely to accelerate his advancement in that career. Sir William was indebted for his title to the simple fact of having presented an address to the sovereign on some special occasion from the worthy citizens of London, some of whom were facetious enough to say that "the whole affair being a piece of presumption, the wine-merchant was knighted for his daring deeds;" but as these wits were certain evil-minded common councilmen of a radical turn, who had voted against the said address, the noble knight was unmoved by this sarcasm, and bore his blushing honours with becoming dignity. There was no Lady Ferndale at present, but as Sir William was a good-looking man, not much more than fifty, there was a chance that he might yet confer that title on some fortunate fair one; consequently he enjoyed an immense degree of popularity in the most polite circles

at the East end of the great metropolis; but he was a cautious man, and knew enough of the world to be on his guard against allurements that might have proved fatal to less experienced campaigners, and it began to be currently reported that Sir William Ferndale was not a marrying man.

His residence was one of the best houses in Finsbury Square, and in a handsomely furnished apartment of that domicile he and his eldest son were at breakfast together, with two or three of the morning papers on the table before them. All of these contained paragraphs relative to the ruinous losses sustained by Mr. Basset, in consequence of the late fire, and both father and son were more silent and thoughtful than usual. Each had taken up the several journals in turn, and read aloud the various accounts given of the accident without a word of comment; but Sir William at length broke the ice by saying,—

“This is an awkward affair, Frank.”

“Yes, sir; it is—rather, but there’s no way of helping it, that I see.” And he looked into his cup, and began to stir his coffee with persevering industry.

“A deuced awkward affair, certainly,” continued his father in a musing tone, as if he were speaking to himself; then, after a pause, during which he cast his eyes over one of the paragraphs before-mentioned, he said, as if in answer to his son’s remark, “No—I don’t see indeed how we are to get out of it with honour—and yet——” Here he made another long pause, then said, “I suppose you are attached to this young lady, Frank?”

“Why, sir, a man would hardly offer himself to any woman unless he cared something about her.”

“No, certainly not—of course not—still——” and he paused again for a few moments, while Frank continued to stir his coffee with compressed lips and thoughtful brow; “still, Frank, I should imagine

that, if you had not already made the proposal, you would think twice before you did so now."

"Very likely, sir."

"I wish there had been some stipulation about a settlement," said Sir William; "then there would have been a fair ground for breaking off the engagement; but who was to foresee such a casualty as this?"

Frank made no reply.

"It strikes me, Frank, that if you could withdraw honourably—mind, I say *honourably*—you would not be very sorry to do so."

"I do not see how it could be done honourably," replied Frank, looking up, and leaning back in his chair. "All the world knows I am engaged to Miss Basset, and a fine hubbub there would be, if I were to break off on account of this cursed accident."

"Oh! as to that, the world does not trouble itself much about such affairs, depend upon it," said Sir William with a smile; for he was now perfectly satisfied as to his son's feelings on the subject, of which he had been rather in doubt. "We must think the matter over. I hope I am not more worldly-minded than other men; yet, I must own I should not like to see the prospects of any one of my sons ruined by an imprudent marriage. Nothing is a greater bar to a young man's prosperity than marrying into a poor family; it is a thing to be avoided, if possible. How should you like to go to Paris for a few weeks, Frank?"

"I should have no objection, sir."

"Why, there's that business of Lafont's; I want to get it settled as soon as I can, and it would be very inconvenient to me to leave town just now; so if you could go for me, I really should be glad."

"When do you wish me to go?"

"The sooner the better, for I want the money. Can you start to-morrow?"

"Yes; there is nothing to prevent me that I know of."

"Very well, then let it be so. I saw Ingleby yesterday, and he told me there was going to be an appeal made to the Board about the insurance, but I doubt whether it will do any good."

"I should think not, sir. I know two or three of the Directors, and am pretty sure they are not the men to pay a farthing more than they are obliged, and I really don't see why they should."

"I am pretty much of the same opinion," said Sir William; "however, we may as well wait to know the result. Where are you going now?"

"To the chambers. If I am to be off to-morrow, I must leave some directions with Frampton. (Frampton was his clerk.) You dine with the Goldsmiths to-day, sir, don't you?"

"Yes; now Frank, if you have any objection to this Paris trip, say so at once, and I will manage some other way."

"No, sir; none in the world. I can easily be back by Sessions, for there are three weeks good yet; so I shall be quite ready to start to-morrow morning."

This point being settled, Frank wrote to Claudia Basset to inform her of his intended journey, and express his regret at not having time to see her before his departure. There was nothing in the letter that could absolutely be called cold or wanting in kindness; yet, on the whole, its tone was unsatisfactory, and afforded neither pleasure nor consolation. Claudia sighed with an undefined feeling of disappointment as she read it; the recollection of his behaviour the night before, with regard to Miss Compton, came to her mind; and, for the second time, she said to herself, "Is this a man to make me happy?"

Sir William Ferndale dined that day in the splendid Hall of the Goldsmiths' Company, of which body he was a member; and there he found himself seated next to Mr. Ingleby, who also belonged to the same

wealthy corporation. At these city dinners it would appear as if men had no other object in meeting together but to dine; and this operation is usually performed in a masterly style. Now Sir William Ferndale enjoyed a good dinner as well as any one; and during its progress his conversation with his neighbours on either hand was limited to the merits of the turtle-soup, iced champagne, and other good things of this life, which abound at the tables of the citizens of London, who certainly have no taste for Spartan fare. It was not, therefore, till after the health of the sovereign had been duly honoured by that tremendous uproar, denominated 'three times three'—a relic of barbarism that might as well be banished from civilised society—that Sir William began to converse on general topics with Mr. Ingleby and amongst other things they talked of the calamity that had so lately befallen Mr. Basset.

"Will the company do anything for him?" Sir William inquired.

"No—I am sorry to say—nothing. I made as strong an appeal as I could, and two or three of them voted with me in favour of the claim; but the majority were against it; so there is nothing to be done."

"It is exactly what I expected—thirty thousand pounds is a large sum."

"Yes, but the company is rich enough; and the case a very peculiar one—not likely to occur again."

"True; and I wish they had taken that view of it, with all my heart, for I am afraid it must be a bankruptcy; he will not be able to stand such a loss, I imagine."

"Yet, he has always had the reputation of being a wealthy man," said Mr. Ingleby. "But I dare say you can pretty well judge of the state of his affairs, as I understand you are likely to be very closely connected."

"You are alluding to the daughter, I suppose, and my son Frank. There is an engagement, certainly;

but it was made under such very different circumstances, that I should think it can hardly be considered binding."

Mr. Ingleby took a very prolonged pinch of snuff, and when he had completed that operation, he said,—

"What are the young gentleman's sentiments on the subject?"

"Why, between you and me, I believe he is wise enough to think as I do, that it would be better for all parties if no such engagement subsisted."

"Humph! Then it ought not to subsist a moment longer."

"I am glad you see the matter in that light," said Sir William, "for, I confess, I should be glad to get Frank out of this scrape, if it were possible."

"And what is to make it impossible?"

"Why, there is a certain amount of regard to be paid to the opinions of the world; and, besides, I am afraid there is sufficient ground for an action."

An almost imperceptible smile passed over the features of Mr. Ingleby, as he had recourse to another long pinch of snuff, then said,—

"You seem to have no doubt that your son is willing to give up the lady?"

"None whatever. In fact, I had some conversation with him this morning about it, and was glad to find that he takes a very sensible view of the case. Frank is no fool; and he knows very well that his own future position in life depends on keeping himself free from difficulties at the outset."

"Amazingly prudent, indeed, for so young a man," observed Mr. Ingleby, drily. "With such notions as those he will be sure to make his way in the world."

Sir William Ferndale was clear sighted enough to perceive the remark was more ironical than approving; yet, as it suited his purpose to obtain an opinion in favour of breaking off the projected alliance from a man so highly respected as Mr. Ingleby, he asked him what he would do under similar circumstances.

“What I would do,” he replied, “I am not quite clear myself, nor does it much signify; but it appears to me there is no question what you ought to do; at least, to a man of my plain way of thinking there is but one right course to pursue.”

“And what is that?”

“It is a very straightforward one. Write a letter to Mr. Basset, stating fairly what your sentiments are with regard to this unfortunate engagement, and say that, under existing circumstances, you think it desirable that it should proceed no further; then, if I have any knowledge of the man, you will receive such an answer as will release your son, and secure him against any proceedings in a court of law.”

Another quiet smile accompanied these last words, the meaning of which it was not easy to define; but if Sir William was not quite pleased with the look and tone of the speaker, he liked the advice, and made up his mind to act upon it.

CHAPTER VII.

BRIANSCOURT, the seat of Lord Merrington, was situated in that part of Nottinghamshire which was the site of the ancient forest of Sherwood, so renowned in olden times for the daring exploits of the bold robber, who, like many other heroes of antiquity, built up for himself a lasting fame on rather a discreditable foundation.

Now it is very clear that the noble mansion which it is here convenient to term Brianscourt, could not have been in existence in the days of Robin Hood and Richard Cœur-de-Lion, nor long afterwards; but it was certainly older than the time of Elizabeth, or even of her doughty sire, and might possibly have originated with the improved taste that began to exhibit itself under the auspices of the seventh Henry, when so many of the English nobility, forbidden to maintain their own private armies, converted their rude castles into magnificent edifices better suited to a more pacific and less barbarous age than that which followed the wars of York and Lancaster. The present lord of the domain had served in the navy during the greater part of his life, and had attained to the rank of Admiral, when he unexpectedly suc-

ceeded to his present title, and the estate thereunto belonging, by an extraordinary fatality, that had carried off three intermediate heirs in the brief space of one year. He was a fine-looking, portly old man, rather bald, with an aquiline nose and a florid complexion, a gentleman by birth and education; but by no means remarkable either for the refinement of his manners, or the temperance of his habits. His married life had been far from happy, for his lady, who had been forced into the marriage against her inclinations, and was moreover of a very unamiable temper, took care to make him as uncomfortable as she possibly could; so that when she died he was rather glad than otherwise, and declared that nothing on earth should induce him to venture again among the rocks and shoals of a matrimonial career.

“No, no,” he said, “I’ve had quite enough of it; I got aground once, and I’ll take pretty good care not to sail on that tack any more.”

He had been a widower about three years, and, as he had no children, the next heir to the title was his nephew, Captain Romer, a cavalry officer, at present unattached, consequently at full leisure to pursue a career that was anything but creditable to him. This gentleman had sojourned upon the earth some nine-and-twenty years, which time he had contrived to spend about as unprofitably as it was possible to do, and he was still pursuing, with unwearied energy, the same thriftless course.

The most remarkable trait in the character of Captain Romer was his very exalted opinion of the graces and high qualities, both personal and intellectual, of that selfsame individual, which, however erroneous it might be, was the basis of all his thoughts, words, and actions. His uncle said he was an intolerable puppy; nevertheless, having no better object to bestow his affections upon, he felt as much love for his nephew as it was in his nature to feel for anybody, and that was no very great amount.

Captain Romer had inherited from his father an estate worth about five hundred a year, and, at the time it came into his possession, which was shortly after he entered the army, he looked upon it as a very fine thing, and felt himself a man of fortune as compared with most of his brother officers ; but when, by the unlooked-for circumstances before mentioned, his uncle, the admiral, became Lord Merrington, and himself presumptive heir to that title, with an estate which, when certain encumbrances were paid off, would be worth fifteen thousand per annum, he began to hold his comparatively small patrimony in utter contempt, and was still more careless of it after the death of his aunt, an event that relieved him from all fear of being superseded by a son, which was at least possible while she was in existence.

The brilliant prospect being now unclouded before him, he began to live at a rate that his income did not go above half way to support, and, at the end of one year, found himself in debt to an extent that might be called considerable, as his affairs then stood. It was in vain, as he well knew, to look to his uncle to make up the deficiency, for the old lord was highly intolerant of anything like extravagance, and in his eyes it would have been little short of actual criminality for a young man with a clear annual income of five hundred pounds, besides his pay, to involve himself in pecuniary difficulties. Captain Romer, in fact, calculated upon a speedy succession to his lordship's title and estate ; for although Lord Merrington was not much over sixty, he was thought to have disease of the heart, a complaint not the less likely to prove fatal from the habits of free living in which he constantly indulged.

Still he did not die ; neither did the captain grow more prudent, and in consequence of these two facts the latter was reduced to the necessity of raising money from time to time by mortgages on his estate, for which he had of course to pay a large interest, and

his income being thereby considerably diminished, his embarrassments were proportionately increased.

All this, however, he studiously concealed from the knowledge of his uncle, whose prejudices he thought it would not be good policy to shock; but as, at the end of three years, the old lord seemed as far from the other world as ever, Captain Romer began seriously to reflect on the propriety of making a tender of his hand to some young lady who had the means of paying a good price for so valuable an article.

The favoured individual he had cast his eyes upon as one in some degree worthy of such distinction, was Florence Gilmour, whom he had met with occasionally, and remarked as being a tolerably fine girl. He was pretty sure the major would give her a splendid fortune, knowing him to be an ostentatious as well as a rich man, and the more especially as there was a coronet in the distance; therefore he decided upon making a proposal.

It was in consequence of this determination that he made his appearance at Brianscourt, the seat of Lord Merrington, on the very day before the Gilmours were expected there, greatly to the surprise of his uncle, whom he did not often favour with his company.

"Why, Fred!" he exclaimed, pushing aside a book of old charts, on which he was tracing out some of his early voyages, "what has brought you down into the country at this time of the year? I thought you could not condescend to breathe out of London in the spring."

"I had nothing particular to do in town, sir, so I thought I would just run down here for a few days, and pay my respects to you."

"Well, that's right; I wish you would come a little oftener, and stay a little longer when you do come, that's all."

"Who have you got here, my lord—anybody?"

"No, nobody at present. So, so, now I begin to

see how the land lies,—looking after the heiress, eh, Fred?”

“Oh! ah! you expect the Indian nabob, don’t you?” Romer asked, with an air of indifference, as if he had just recollected the circumstance; “I think you wrote to me that he was coming.”

“Why, you know I did, sir; and you know very well that is what has brought you here. But I’ll tell you what, Fred, she’ll have nothing to say to you, depend upon it.”

“Do you think so, my lord?” said Romer, stroking his handsome moustaches, and running his taper fingers through a mass of black curling hair.

“Yes, I do, sir,” replied his lordship; “though I dare say you are conceited enough to think otherwise. Well, I’ve nothing to say against your making the trial, for I suppose you’ll marry some day or other—more fool you. So now let’s have done with that wishy-washy subject; you shall have something to eat, and then we’ll go out and look about us.”

“Deuced slow work, that,” thought Romer; “I wish he would ask somebody to dine.”

But his lordship did not choose to ask anybody to dine; consequently his nephew was compelled to sit over the wine for three hours after dinner, and listen to a number of old stories that he had heard many times before, without even the solacing companionship of his cigar; for, as the old gentleman did not smoke himself, he never permitted younger ones to do so in his presence, being, from habit as well as inclination, a strict disciplinarian, and Romer, with all his confidence, was rather afraid of him.

Slow as the day was, however, it came to an end at last, and the following one brought the expected visitors. Lord Merrington had known Major Gilmour as a young man, before he went to India, and they had met again in Italy after the major’s return to Europe, and spent a month together at Naples; but his lordship had never seen Florence before, and

although he had no great liking for women in general, he seemed to think she was a better specimen of the sex than was usually to be met with, and even carried his admiration so far as to tell his nephew "he was not so great a fool as he took him to be."

Brianscourt was really a beautiful place; the park not very extensive, but well wooded, and the ornamental grounds were laid out with much taste, and kept in extreme good order. The house was one of those large old-fashioned mansions with tapestried walls, polished oaken floors, painted ceilings, and antique furniture, that are often made a show of to parties bent on pleasure excursions,—an arrangement highly beneficial to the servants of the said establishment, who derive a considerable revenue therefrom.

In the great hall were displayed several banners, torn and faded, the glorious memorials of battles and victories in which the present lord had borne a part; and leading out of this were the dining-room, breakfast-room, and library, three very comfortable apartments, fitted up in a more modern style than the rest of the habitation, and sacred from the intrusion of stranger-visitors. The grand staircase, of ample width, ascended to a gallery decorated with paintings, and opening on one side into a handsome suite of rooms, that were only used when company was staying in the house, and, on the other, into several sleeping apartments. There was a spacious ball-room at one end, where, it was told, the sovereigns of the house of Tudor had led many a courtly dame, but it was now seldom entered except by sight-seers, and at the other end was a small chapel, which had probably been but little used since the Reformation.

All these were objects of interest to Florence Gilmour, who had never before seen an English mansion of the olden time; but she was both surprised and annoyed at finding that Captain Romer was the only visitor staying in the house, as she thought Lord Merrington might have had the courtesy to

invite some lady to receive her, especially as he had a sister and other relatives living in the county; and this omission caused her the greater disquietude, as she soon found that the captain was inclined to pay her more attention than she desired, and that her father treated him with marked consideration.

“Dear me, sir,” she said, as soon as she had an opportunity of speaking to the major alone, “this is exceedingly awkward and disagreeable for me; I had no idea but that there would have been some ladies here; I hope you do not intend to stay long?”

“I intend to stay three days,” the major replied, in his usual stiff, precise manner; “and I should think, Miss Gilmour, the fact of being under my protection might relieve you from any feeling of awkwardness or impropriety; and, surely, in such a place as this, you may find means to pass your time agreeably, even without ladies.”

“I certainly could if I were left to myself, but that young man is insufferable.”

“Are you speaking of Captain Romer, Florence?” her father asked, with something of displeasure in his tone and look.

“Yes, sir, I am; you surely see nothing to admire in him, do you?”

“I really see nothing to disapprove; you are aware, I suppose, that he is Lord Merrington’s heir?”

This question served to confirm Florence in a suspicion she had previously entertained as to her father’s motives in bringing her to Brianscourt, and it caused her some anxiety, for she was too well acquainted with his arbitrary temper not to dread the effects of any opposition to his will; nevertheless, she answered with much spirit to his last remark, which he had put into the form of a query,—

“I certainly know that he is Lord Merrington’s heir; but as that is a circumstance in which I am not at all interested, it does not make his self-sufficiency

more endurable, or his frivolity more entertaining.”

“I should hardly think you would have found less of either, even had you been provided with companions of your own sex,” replied the major, with a contemptuous smile; “and I expect, Miss Gilmour, that while you are Lord Merrington’s guest, you will conduct yourself with politeness, at least, towards so important a member of his family as Captain Romer.”

This was said in a tone of authority, and Florence made no reply, but it left the unpleasant impression on her mind that a proposal of marriage from Captain Romer was not an unlikely event, and that it would be sanctioned and urged by her father.

It was now the early part of April, and the days were remarkably fine and warm for the time of year, but the evenings were chilly, and as Lord Merrington was a man who liked everything to look cheerful and comfortable about him, there was a good fire blazing in every room his visitors were likely to enter. In the drawing-rooms Florence found a harp, a piano, and some music books that had belonged to the late Lady Merrington, and in the course of the evening she delighted the old lord by playing and singing some of his favourite airs and ballads.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next day being Sunday, the whole party went to a pretty little church that stood in the centre of a straggling village called Bleachley, or something like it, about a mile and a half from Brianscourt, where the congregation, with the exception of Lord Merrington and his guests, was composed entirely of the villagers, many of whom were waiting about the churchyard to witness the arrival of the great folks, who alighted from the carriage and walked up the narrow gravel path amidst a running fire of rustic bows and bob courtesys that went in regular succession along the two lines of gazers that flanked the way on both sides, between the little white gate and the church-door.

The interior of the humble edifice was plain and simple in the extreme, with the exception of the state pew, which was furnished with cushions and curtains, but it could boast of one ornament not frequently met with in a village church, and that was a very good organ, which had been presented by the late Lord of Brianscourt, whose ears could never accommodate themselves pleasantly to a concert of flutes, fifes, and violins, that did not very strictly harmonise with each other.

The Rector of Bleachley was an elderly man, who had watched over the spiritual welfare of rather a troublesome flock for more than thirty years, performing the whole duty himself, as the living was too poor a one to afford a curate; therefore, on the morning in question, it was with no little surprise that the people saw a stranger take his place at the reading desk, and a universal whispering was heard, whilst looks of curiosity were directed towards the unknown, who opened the book and commenced the preliminary sentences in a voice so full, deep, and melodious, that it produced the instantaneous effect of silencing every other sound, and fixing the attention of the hearers.

He was a young man, apparently not more than three or four and twenty, tall and dark, but his face was more interesting than handsome, being very pale and somewhat sallow; still his features had a noble cast, his eyes were full of expression, and his fine forehead betokened an intellect of no common order. During the service his whole soul appeared to be engaged in the performance of his duty, and everybody present seemed to be inspired with a more than ordinary sense of devotion, which even extended itself to Lord Merrington, who was not famous for his attention in general to the prescribed forms of divine worship.

When the prayers were ended, he beckoned to the pew-opener, and asked her who was going to give the sermon.

"The same gentleman that read prayers, please your lordship," replied the woman, with a low courtesy.

"What is the reason of that? Where is Mr. Mackenzie?"

"He was taken ill this morning, my lord, and obliged to send off for somebody to do duty for him."

Lord Merrington was going to ask some other

question, but at that moment the young clergyman ascended the pulpit, and every eye was again turned upon him.

The sermon was a plain discourse, well adapted to the comprehension of an assemblage of simple rustics, and the persuasive eloquence of the preacher, who set forth in a most impressive manner the religious and moral duties of the humble class to whom his exhortations were chiefly addressed, excited the most profound attention. Before he had concluded, however, an incident occurred that created some confusion among the people, and caused a momentary interruption, for a poor sickly-looking woman, sitting in one of the open seats, suddenly fainted, and was carried out of the church. The preacher stopped, and his eyes followed the poor woman with a look of so much interest and compassion, that Florence, who observed it, said to herself,—

“That look came from a benevolent heart, I am sure.”

As soon as the bustle occasioned by this accident had subsided, the youthful divine resumed his discourse, and went on to the end without further hindrance.

Lord Merrington, in going out of church, asked the pew-opener who the preacher was, and where he came from; but she could give him no information on either of these points, as he was quite a stranger, she said, in the village; but he was most likely Dr. Hay's curate, for Dr. Hay was Mr. Mackenzie's particular friend.

“This won't do, though, Mrs. Wilson,” said his lordship; “we musn't have our parson disabled, or we shall all be going the wrong way, hey! What is it ails him?”

“I don't rightly know, my lord, but the doctor said he must keep to his bed for a day or two and eat nothing.”

“Well, I dare say that may be very good advice,

though I can't say I should like to take it myself; I shall send over to-morrow to know how he is."

Lord Merrington passed on, and then Florence stopped to ask some questions respecting the poor woman who had fainted.

"Her name is Allen, my lady; and she lives in the little cottage with a garden in front, at the corner of the road leading to the wooden bridge."

"Is she in bad health?"

"Oh, yes, my lady; she is very weakly, poor thing."

"What is her employment?"

"She does a little needlework, my lady, for the gentry round about; but she is not able to do much, and——"

But Florence had no time to ask or to hear more, for her father had turned back to hasten her, as Lord Merrington was already in the carriage; however, she just said hurriedly, "I will try to come and see her to-morrow morning." And taking the major's arm she quitted the church.

The day being remarkably fine, Lord Merrington proposed that they should take a drive to a celebrated spot about three miles distant, from which there was a fine view of the surrounding country; and in returning through the village, they saw the young clergyman come out of a cottage which, from its situation, Florence knew to be that which the pew-opener had described to her as Mrs. Allen's abode. As the carriage passed he touched his hat and bowed with a pleasant smile of recognition, which was returned by the whole party, with the addition of a deep blush on the part of the lady, who could not but see that the smile and the bow, though meant to be general, were directed particularly towards her.

"He is a good-looking fellow," observed Lord Merrington, "and did not preach amiss, either, for such a youngster."

"No, not at all," responded the major; "a very creditable performance indeed for so young a man; his manner is exceedingly good."

"Rather priggish," observed Romer.

"What do you mean by priggish, Captain Romer?" Florence asked, with rather an arch look.

"I mean pretty tolerably conceited," he replied, stroking his chin with his white, ungloved hand.

"And pray may I ask," she said, "by what signs and tokens you have arrived at that conclusion?"

"He seems fortunate enough to have gained your admiration, Miss Gilmour, at any rate."

Lord Merrington burst into a violent fit of laughter.

"So, so," he said, "Fred's jealous of the parson, that's it—ha! ha! ha! But, I say, Fred, what right have you to find fault with a fellow for his puppyism, hey?"

"As much right as any one else I suppose, my lord."

"Well, but that's very much like a lobster calling a soldier 'red coat,' isn't it?"

And his lordship indulged in another hearty laugh at the expense of his nephew, who was very much annoyed at the joke, especially as Miss Gilmour was evidently amused by it. The major, however, did not look very well pleased, for it offended his dignity that the curate of a country village should be mentioned, even in jest, as a person whose name could by any possibility be coupled with that of his daughter in the manner alluded to.

"The young man is well enough in the pulpit," he said, stiffly, "and is, I have no doubt, very fit for his vocation, but I should hope Miss Gilmour knows better what is due both to herself and to me, than to bestow any more admiration on so obscure a person than his sermon merits."

"But, by your own confession, sir," replied Florence, "his sermon merits a great deal of admiration; and we can scarcely admire the words and works of

any man, without bestowing some share of our approbation upon himself."

"Whose place is that, my lord?" said the major, pointing to a fine mansion at some distance; and not a word more was said about the curate during the ride.

To Florence's great relief there were visitors that day at Briancourt, two of whom were ladies, and she was thus enabled to escape from the unwelcome assiduities of the captain, who did not recover his good humour all the day.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next morning, immediately after breakfast, Florence requested Lord Merrington to let her have the pony carriage that she might ride over to the village, as she had promised, to see the poor woman whose illness in the church had excited her sympathy.

“With all my heart, Miss Gilmour; you may take which carriage you please, and while you pay your visit, John can just drive round to the rectory and ask how Mr. Mackenzie is, with my compliments.”

Captain Romer appeared to be, for some reason which he did not vouchsafe to make known, extremely annoyed at this proceeding, connecting it possibly in his mind with other occurrences of the preceding day that had not pleased him. He bit his lip, and walked to a window with an air expressive of anything but satisfaction, and having looked out for a minute or two in silence, turned to Florence, and said abruptly,—

“Will you permit me to go with you, Miss Gilmour?”

“I thank you, Captain Romer, but I shall much prefer going alone on such an errand as this.”

Major Gilmour was not present, and the captain,

mortified at this refusal, turned discontentedly to the window again, whilst Florence left the room to prepare for her expedition.

"I say, Fred," said Lord Merrington, looking up from his newspaper, "the wind don't sit very fair in that quarter I think. Didn't I tell you how it would be—hey?"

"I hope you are mistaken, my lord; it was fair enough yesterday, I believe, and I see no reason why it should be otherwise to-day."

"Reason!" said his lordship. "Do you suppose a woman ever stands about a reason for what she does? It's no go, my boy—no go, I tell you! ha! ha! ha!"—and the old gentleman seemed to enjoy the notion of his nephew's disappointment vastly, although it would have been difficult to trace the source of his satisfaction, as he really approved of the connection, and was decidedly of opinion that, if Romer did marry, he could not make a better choice.

Florence alighted at the entrance of the village, and walked on towards the wooden bridge, where Mrs. Allen's little isolated cottage stood. It was a very poor place, but it had not that neglected look which betokens extreme want; for the garden was in neat order, the windows were shaded by clean white muslin blinds, and a vine was carefully trained over the green-latticed porch, which made a very pretty entrance, and gave a better appearance to this cottage than was observable in many others belonging to less needy people. In answer to Florence's gentle tap at the door, a feeble voice said "Come in," and on raising the latch, she found that the door opened into a small room, where the first object that presented itself to her sight was the young curate, with an open bible in his hand, sitting by the bed-side of the suffering woman.

His fine dark eyes flashed with delighted surprise as he rose and bowed in silence to the fair visitant,

who returned the salutation with a slight degree of embarrassment.

"I am come to see how you are to-day, Mrs. Allen," she said, going to the side of the bed; "I was in church yesterday when you were taken so ill."

"You are very good, ma'am; Mrs. Wilson sent me word a lady was coming to see me, but I did not know who it was. I am a little better to-day."

"I am afraid I have interrupted you, sir," said Florence, turning to the clergyman, who was still standing; "you were reading, I think—pray go on, for I am not in the least hurry, and can talk to Mrs. Allen when you have finished."

"I had finished, madam, and was taking my leave for the present. I wish I could have staid with you a little longer, Mrs. Allen, but it is impossible this morning; however, I am glad to see my place so well supplied;" and he looked at Florence with a smile so bright, so approving, that it dwelt in her remembrance long afterwards.

"I shall be, I fear, but a very inefficient substitute," she replied, "but not an unwilling one, I hope you will believe."

"I do, indeed, most firmly believe it;" and the warmth with which he spoke brought a deep blush to her cheek which she endeavoured to conceal by bending her head over the couch, and speaking to the invalid.

The curate lingered a few moments, as if he would have said something more, but his invention did not seem to supply him with anything more to say, therefore he was driven to the necessity of making his exit without another word beyond the customary "Good morning."

Florence now began to inquire into the nature of the poor woman's complaint, which appeared to be an excess of that debility frequently occasioned by a sedentary life and poor living. She said she had been in this state for a long time, and that the parish

doctor came to see her once a-week, for she had been obliged to apply for some aid from the parish; but the medicine she had taken, instead of doing her good, had only made her feel weaker.

"Is there any other doctor you would like better?"

"I have sometimes thought, miss, that if I could have a little advice from Dr. Lawford, it might perhaps do me good, for he is very clever, they say, and a nice, kind gentleman, too."

"Where does he live?"

"About a quarter of a mile on the other side of the bridge; he attends all the gentry hereabouts, and everybody speaks well of him."

"Then, if you really think he might do you good, I will call and ask him to come and see you."

A flush of joy and gratitude passed over the thin wan face of the invalid, as she uttered her thanks.

"But, do you think, ma'am," she added timidly, "that it would offend Mr. Bright?"

"Who is Mr. Bright—the gentleman that was here just now?"

"Oh, no, miss, that was the minister. Mr. Bright is the parish doctor, and he is easily affronted; but he is always in such a hurry, for he says he has so many of us to see—and he never seems pleased if we don't say we are better."

This account of the village Æsculapius did not give Florence a very high idea of his humanity or skill, consequently she determined to engage the services of Dr. Lawford, if possible, as she really felt interested about the poor woman; and if that interest was strengthened by the circumstance of its being shared by one who was as yet a stranger to her, she certainly was unconscious that such was the case, nor would she have been more sparing of her charity if it had not been so.

"What is the name of the gentleman who came to see you this morning?" she asked; and she blushed

as she did so, being perfectly aware that the question had nothing whatever to do with the business in hand.

Mrs. Allen did not know his name, nor anything about him, except that he was the curate of a distant village ; but she spoke in the most grateful terms of his kindness ; said that he had brought her some wine, and that he was going to send meat for broth, and had promised to see her again the next day.

“ But, above all,” she added, “ he read to me and talked so nicely that I felt quite comforted, and I hope he’ll live to be a bishop, that I do.”

“ And if he should,” said Florence, smiling, “ it is to be hoped you will live to see it, Mrs. Allen.”

The poor woman returned the smile ; but her eyes filled with tears, and a look of melancholy stole over her pallid features that told how little hope she felt of lengthened days or returning health.

After remaining with her above an hour, and giving her all the comfort that gentle words can afford ; Florence rose to depart. Mrs. Allen looked wistfully at her, and asked timidly if she would come again, to which she replied,—

“ I am afraid it will not be in my power to do so, as, I believe, we shall leave Brianscourt to-morrow.”

“ But you will be coming to my lord’s again, may-be ?” said the invalid.

“ If I do, I shall certainly call to see you ; but I should be glad to do something more for you now if I could ; so, if there is anything you wish, pray tell me.”

Mrs. Allen, with a delicacy not often met with amongst people of her condition, declared she wanted nothing, and repeated her thanks for the kindness already shown her ; however, her charitable benefactress insisted on leaving her the means of procuring a few extra comforts, and, as she left the cottage, the poor woman, clasping her hands and bursting into

tears, exclaimed in grateful accents,—“What a wondrous Providence to raise up two such friends in one day!”

Florence returned to the spot where she had desired the carriage should be in waiting, and directed the coachman to drive across the wooden bridge and inquire for the residence of Dr. Lawford, who fortunately happened to be at home. He was a pleasant looking man, whose countenance indicated much good feeling, and he listened with evident interest as Miss Gilmour explained the object of her visit.

“But this poor thing,” he said, “is a patient of Bright’s I think; and I don’t see how I can very well interfere.”

“Is it necessary, sir, that Mr. Bright should know anything about it?”

“Not absolutely necessary, certainly; but don’t you know, my dear young lady, there are always plenty of busy tongues ready to whisper anything that is likely to cause a little mischief?”

“But do you think, sir, it is quite right that the life of this poor woman should be sacrificed to such considerations?”

“No; I do not think it is right, so I shall go and see her; and if Bright hears of it I must get over it as well as I can, by saying I acted at the special request of a lady.”

Florence thanked him, and begging he would send her what medicines she might require, put into his hand a bank note, at which he looked with some surprise.

“My good lady, this is far more than is needful, for I shall charge nothing for my visits, and it is to be hoped she will not want five pounds’ worth of medicine;—why, it would be enough to depopulate the village,” he added, laughing.

Florence laughed too, saying she should be sorry to be the cause of such a catastrophe; but requested

that the doctor would employ the money in any way he thought best for the patient's benefit, which he readily promised to do, and looked so perfectly charmed with his fair visitant, that if he had not casually made mention of Mrs. Lawford, she might have been justified in supposing it was a case of love at first sight; but the worthy doctor's allegiance to his better half was unshaken even in thought, for his admiration extended no further than strict propriety warranted, and was only such as any respectable gentleman might naturally feel at the sight of a young and lovely woman engaged in a work of charity.

When Miss Gilmour returned to Brianscourt, it is somewhat remarkable that, in speaking of her visit to the cottage, she never once mentioned her meeting with the young clergyman there; perhaps the circumstance had escaped her memory.

CHAPTER X.

THE appeal on behalf of Mr. Basset, to the directors of the insurance company, had been unsuccessful. It was presented by Mr. Ingleby, who stated, in a forcible manner, the peculiar circumstances of the case ; at the same time giving his opinion that, as the money was actually sent by the insurer within the given time, as could be proved by the cheque for the amount, dated on the day preceding the fire, it was, in point of fact, paid, and ought in honour to be considered so, although the messenger had failed to execute his commission. The insurer, he maintained, had performed his part of the contract, and it was illiberal to take advantage of another person's neglect, to shrink from the performance of theirs. On the other hand it was argued that, although no one doubted the word of so respectable a man as Mr. Basset, yet it would be a dangerous precedent to act upon it, as cheques might be drawn by individuals, whose scruples of conscience would never prevent them from affixing any date to any document that might best suit their convenience ; and if once such a claim was admitted, the interests of the company would be materially injured.

The question was warmly debated, as two or three of the more liberal members took the same view of the matter as Mr. Ingleby; but, after a long discussion, the petition was rejected, and soon afterwards the name of Basset appeared in the Gazette. It was generally thought a hard case, and talked of for a few days, but in a short time it was forgotten, except by such as were immediately interested, and one or two of those "gems of the human species," whose hearts are too intrinsically warm to turn cold at the sight of a friend in adversity. Acquaintances dropped off by degrees; the house at Kensington was given up, its lease and furniture were sold by auction; and the unfortunate family removed to a small house at Upper Clapton, where one female servant, in addition to themselves, constituted the whole of the domestic establishment. Mrs. Basset did not long survive the blow. Always weak both in mind and body, the little strength that had remained to her gave way under the shock of her fallen fortunes, and in one week after the removal she had ceased to be. Charles Basset followed the remains of his mother to the grave, with all the grief and remorse of one who accused himself of having at least hastened, if not caused, her death, and from that time he was an altered being. He seldom spoke, yet his silence seemed the effect of deep thought, rather than of settled melancholy; he was frequently out during the greater part of the day, and when at home, the Bible was constantly in his hand, and he seemed to be lost in profound meditation. Not a single word of unkindness or reproach had fallen from the lips of his father, who, in talking of his affairs, always carefully avoided any allusion to the negligence that had brought him into his present unfortunate position; and this forbearance was duly appreciated by the unhappy young man, although it failed to restore him to himself.

"Dear Charles," said Claudia, one day when they

were alone together, "I wish you would endeavour to be a little more cheerful; we should all be much happier if we could but see you so; and indeed you should make the effort for your father's sake."

He shook his head mournfully, and casting a troubled glance around the meanly-furnished apartment, said, with bitterness,—

"Is this a place for my father?"

Claudia understood the self-reproach contained in those words, and replied, with gentleness,—

"He feels it less than you do, Charles, and is becoming more reconciled to the change every day. We are all getting accustomed to it; and I begin to think the discomforts are, after all, more imaginary than real."

Charles was silent for a few moments, and a deeper shade of thought came over his face. At length he said, slowly and seriously,—

"Claudia, you have all treated me with a degree of forbearance and consideration I have but little merited, and I feel it deeply—how deeply, you, my sister, can never know. But I have a grievous sin to expiate, and it must be expiated by toil and suffering."

"Oh, no, Charles, no!" she cried, interrupting him. "You judge yourself too harshly; believe me, my dearest brother, your fault is already sufficiently atoned for, by the sorrow and repentance you have felt."

"Atoned for, did you say? How can I ever atone for bringing my father to ruin, and my mother to the grave?—for blighting my brother's fair prospects, and destroying my sister's peace? For I fear, my kind and generous Claudia, you have yet to discover the extent of the injury I have done you."

"If you mean what I suppose you do, Charles, there is no occasion to distress yourself about that. You are thinking of Mr. Ferndale, are you not?"

"I am. Do you think my fears are groundless?"

"No, dear," she replied with a sigh; "on the contrary, I believe they are well founded; but that need not make you uneasy; for it is, perhaps, quite as well that something should have occurred to try the sincerity of his affection. If he fail under that trial, he is not a man to be loved or trusted; and I hope I shall have fortitude enough not only to give him up without regret, but to rejoice that my happiness was not entrusted to such doubtful keeping."

"Are you certain of your own strength, dearest Claudia? for in this it will assuredly be tried."

"I feel that it will, and am prepared for whatever may happen; and indeed, Charles, if he should leave me for this, I shall most truly rejoice that I was still free."

"Thank God! Then one heavy burthen, at least, is removed from my mind."

"Dismiss all the rest, love, and be assured that our greatest sorrow now is to see you so unhappy. Come, promise me that you will try to be yourself again." And she put her arm round his neck, and pressed her lips to his cheek.

He returned the embrace affectionately, but without a word; and, sighing heavily, he rose and left the room.

Frank Ferndale had now been absent nearly a month, yet Claudia had received only two letters from him, and those were not such as to dispel the doubts she entertained as to the disinterestedness of his affection, or the amiability of his disposition. In fact, they contained little else than an account of his own doings in the French capital, which might have been an amusing theme enough at a happier time, but it ill accorded with the present circumstances, and afforded a still further proof of that selfishness which had already caused her so much anxiety. Selfishness, however, was no part of her own character, and she had so many others to think for, that she gave but little time to the contemplation of her own

disappointed affections ; and it was not long before a new and unforeseen affliction banished for awhile the remembrance of all other misfortunes, or made them appear light in comparison with a sorrow so little anticipated. Charles suddenly disappeared from his home, without having given the slightest intimation of his intentions. He left on the table in his bedroom a letter addressed to his father, who broke the seal with a trembling hand, whilst a sickening dread came over his senses, as his eye glanced hastily over the contents ; and when relieved from his worst fears, he fervently thanked God that the evil was not so great as in the first moment of alarm he had apprehended. Satisfied of this, he calmly, though sorrowfully, perused the long epistle, which had evidently been traced by an unsteady hand, and was here and there blotted with tears.

CHARLES BASSET'S LETTER TO HIS FATHER.

“It is all in vain, my beloved father, that I try to regain some share of the peace of mind I have lost, or form any plan with a view to retrieve your ruined fortunes—ruined by me—that is a truth which all your kindness, all your consideration, can never banish for one moment from my mind. And why should I seek to forget it, even for a moment, since it must guide and govern every action of my future life? Think me not ungrateful, dear father ; think not that I have failed to appreciate your goodness, your loving-kindness to me, all undeserving as I am ; but every kind word you utter, every look of love you bestow upon me, oppresses my heart more heavily with the sense of its own unworthiness. Yet, when I am far away, the remembrance of your affection will be my greatest solace in all sorrows, my support and consolation under every trial it may be my lot to bear. Do not be uneasy on my account. I have marked out a course for myself—one of toil and hardship ; it

may be, but I will not shrink from it, for I feel that it is the best atonement I can make.

“Forgive me for leaving you thus ; forgive me for the concealment I have used ; but it is necessary, for I know you would try to shake my resolution, to keep me with you ; and I dare not trust myself, for my strength might fail. I must go, my father, for I cannot bear to witness the desolation I have made. I have not courage to meet the eye of my brother, who will now so soon return, for how could I answer to him for the misconduct that has blighted all his fair prospects, and left nothing but poverty before him ? I have not taken this step without reflection ; day and night it has been the subject of my meditations ; and view it in what light I may, I have always come to the same conclusion, that it is the only way to merit and obtain pardon from Heaven for the wrong I have done. I know that you have forgiven me, my father ; I know that my sisters do not harbour one ungentle thought towards me ; and from Norman’s generous, noble spirit, I am conscious there is nothing to fear. Yet I cannot stay ; I feel impelled by an irresistible power to earn my forgiveness by self-sacrifices and good works ; and this feeling grows stronger every day : therefore, let us not doubt that it comes from the highest source, and will lead to good. You blessed me last night, my father, when I retired to rest. I felt then as if that blessing would follow me in exile, and prosper all my undertakings. Let this comfort you, as it will comfort me ; and let us all hope and trust that we shall meet again under happier circumstances than those which at present surround us.

“And now, adieu, my beloved father ; adieu, my gentle sisters ; waste not a thought on me ; but remember that you have another son—another brother—who will need all your cares, and is more worthy of your love than the unhappy and penitent—CHARLES.”

Bitter were the tears that rolled thick and fast down the cheeks of the venerable parent as he read this affecting epistle; for of all the troubles that had yet come upon him, this seemed the greatest, and caused him the most real sorrow. Charles had always been his favourite child, perhaps for no other reason than because he was the first-born; for how often do we find that the earliest object of parental affection continues to be the dearest! His sisters almost idolized him, for he had been brought up with them at home, and ever looked up to as their protector, as well as companion; whereas Norman had from an early age been away, either at school or college, and was, as compared with his brother, almost a stranger. Claudia wept in silence over this new affliction; but Emily, with the natural impetuosity of her temper, gave way to the most violent demonstrations of grief, sobbing aloud, wringing her hands, and venting her excited feelings by passionate exclamations. She had borne the reverse of fortune without repining; had submitted to every privation with admirable cheerfulness, and exerted her utmost ingenuity to give, by many little contrivances, an appearance of comfort to their present abode; but this was a sorrow that touched her heart, and she could not bear up against it.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN the first emotions of grief had in some degree subsided, Mr. Basset read the letter again, in the vain hope of finding some expression that might afford a clue to the plans and destination of the fugitive; but, although it seemed most probable that he had either left, or was about to leave, the country, yet it was impossible to guess where he was going, or with what intent. The only chance of making the discovery was through Mr. Ingleby, who, being a ship-broker, had a large connection amongst ship-owners and captains of vessels, therefore might be able to learn whether Charles had taken his passage to any one of the colonies, as it was not an unreasonable supposition that he might be going, like many others, to seek his fortune in New Zealand, or one of the Australian settlements. Possessed with this idea, and the hope of inducing him to return, Mr. Basset wrote to his friend, who received the letter while he was taking his breakfast on the following morning. Mr. Ingleby lived in the easiest and most comfortable style of bachelorship; it would be hardly fair to say old-bachelorship, although upwards of fifty years had run their course since the following announcement

appeared in the daily papers of the great metropolis,—“On the sixth instant, in Portman Square, the lady of Peter Ingleby, Esq., of a son.” And this was the only time, as regarded Mrs. Peter Ingleby, that such a notice ever did appear. The little individual, thus duly registered as a new member of society about half a century before the commencement of this history, was now a very respectable and highly-esteemed gentleman, somewhat past the meridian of life it is true, but endowed with so many excellent and attractive qualities, that why he should have remained single to the age of fifty-four was a mystery only known to himself. His house, in the vicinity of the Regent’s Park, was fitted up with admirable taste, and his housekeeper, a quiet, matronly person of mature age, managed his domestic affairs with considerable ability, so that he could have his bachelor parties in good style, with no more trouble to himself than merely saying,—“Mrs. Garnet, I shall have so many gentlemen to dine with me to-morrow, and should like such and such dishes; the rest I leave to you.”

Now it was currently reported that Mr. Ingleby’s dinners were capital things of the kind; and the readiness with which his invitations were generally accepted afforded good proofs of the truth of such rumours, as well as of the fitness of Mrs. Garnet for the post she occupied. Sometimes, perhaps, it might cross the mind of Mr. Ingleby, that if there were a lady at the head of the table, and a few more ornaments of the same kind around it, the appearance of his domicile would be improved; but, somehow or other, he neglected to act upon this excellent mental suggestion, and Mrs. Garnet continued, from year to year, in undisturbed possession of the sovereignty of the Ingleby establishment. Perhaps it was that the lord and master of that little empire took into consideration the present very comfortable state of his affairs, and thought there was wisdom in the old adage, which advises rash mortals to “let well alone;”

so he went on contentedly leading a bachelor's life; and a tolerably easy life it seemed to be.

On the morning in question he was enjoying the luxuries of dressing-gown and slippers, a good breakfast, and "The Times," when two letters were brought to him, the one from Mr. Basset, and the other, which bore the post-mark, "Basingstoke," from one of his tenants, a farmer in that part of Hampshire, where he had a good deal of landed property. The purport of the former is already known; these were the contents of the latter:—

"TO GEORGE INGLEBY, ESQ.

"DEAR SIR—

"A melancholy circumstance has taken place at the Bridge House, which I thought it right to make you acquainted with immediately. Poor Burton died yesterday in a fit of apoplexy, brought on, no doubt, by intemperance, and it appears he has not left enough behind him even to pay the expenses of interment. I have, however, given orders for all that is necessary in that respect, to be done on my responsibility; but I should be glad to know how he stood with you as to arrears of rent, and whether you will choose to take what there is in the house, or let it be sold to pay the debts he has contracted in the neighbourhood. If I can take any trouble off your hands, you may command my services, and I shall also be happy to make an arrangement with you about taking the two fields, if you can let the house and garden without them.

"I am, dear Sir—yours very truly,

"FRESHFIELD RAY."

"God bless me! this is a bad affair," said Mr. Ingleby, as he refolded the letter—"a very bad affair indeed; however, it might have been worse—for, if he has left no money, he has left no wife or children to want it, that's one comfort. He was a foolish, im-

provident fellow, and I ought to have got rid of him long ago.—Arrears of rent—let me see; I think I have received none, or next to none, for the last five quarters; but it does not much signify. The traps had better go to pay the debts, which, I suppose, are owing among the poor shopkeepers in the village—and Ray may as well have the fields—he is a worthy fellow; and as to the house, why, I must take my chance about it—I wonder”——and here he fell into a deep fit of musing which lasted about ten minutes, and ended with this remark—“I can but make the offer at any rate.”

Having come to this conclusion, his ideas apparently branched off into another channel, for they ran thus—“So that young man Ferndale is come back, I find;—she is far too nice a girl to be thrown away upon such a heartless fellow as that; and yet it is an awkward matter to interfere in such cases. I shall see how the affair goes on. As to the son, poor fellow, I will do what I can to find him out; but I think it would be a pity to stop him.”

He now rose from the table, put the two letters, with some other papers, into a writing-desk, which he carefully locked, and then proceeded to his dressing-room, where he made a more elaborate toilet than usual, and when it was completed, looked remarkably well for a man whose birth had been announced nearly fifty-four years back. His figure was good, his step firm, his teeth white and even; and his hair, which had been very dark in his younger days, although rather plentifully besprinkled with grey, was still as luxuriant in its growth as that of a man of twenty. Having arrayed his person with the utmost care, and taken from a drawer a new pair of gloves that fitted with the nicest exactness, he sallied forth from his house, and got into an omnibus that set him down at the Bank. He then looked out for one on which the words “Upper Clapton” were inscribed, and happily meeting in a few minutes with the object

of his search, took his seat therein, and precisely at half-past one o'clock knocked at the door of a small domicile in that locality.

"Mr. Ingleby!" said Claudia, in a tone of joyful surprise, and the gentleman, with becoming gallantry, drew off his glove to take the young lady's proffered hand, which he held rather longer than the rules of etiquette required. When the usual compliments had been exchanged, and he was left alone with Mr. Basset, he at once began to speak of the absentee, and inquire into the particulars of his departure, which Mr. Basset replied to by putting into his hand Charles's letter, which he read with great attention, and after reflecting upon it for a few minutes, said,—

"You appear to look upon the step your son has taken as an act of rashness to be lamented; but, I must confess, I see it in a very different point of view. It is clear to me from this, that he has not been actuated by a reckless feeling of desperation, but has thought seriously of what he was about to do, and has most likely come to a wise conclusion. Depend upon it, he has gone with good hopes and good intentions—he seems determined to repair his error as far as possible; and who can tell but what all that has happened may have been wisely ordained for some good end."

"I would most willingly believe it," replied Mr. Basset, wiping the tears from his eyes, "perhaps it may be so; but the loss of my poor unhappy boy is a hard trial nevertheless. If I could only know where he is, and what he is going to do, I should be satisfied."

"No, you would not—you would want him to come back again; and that might not be the best thing for either of you. It is very likely he will not let you know anything about it till he is beyond reach."

"It is your opinion, then, that he is leaving England?"

“I think there can be no doubt of it; but, my good friend, it ought to be a great consolation to you to know that he has so much good feeling, and that he puts his trust in the right place.”

These and similar arguments were balm to the heart of the afflicted father.

“I thank you,” he said, “I thank you most sincerely—yes; I feel that you are right, and this assurance comforts me. Perhaps it is the best thing, after all.”

“There can be no question about that; for, as long as he remained here his mind would never recover its proper tone. Whatever may be the course he has chosen, the very confidence he expresses of its success will stimulate him to use all his energies in pursuit of it; and if you could but reconcile yourself to the separation, it is my firm belief there is more reason for joy than for sorrow.”

“Well, well—I will at least try to think so—but you are not a father.”

“True; therefore I am in the better condition to argue the point wisely, and without prejudice. Everything takes its hue from the medium through which we see it; and now, permit me to ask if you have decided upon your own plans, for I presume you do not mean to stay here.”

“I have decided on nothing yet, and for myself it matters but little, for my days will not be long in the land; but, for the sake of my children, I must fix upon some plan that will secure a home for them, however humble it may be, in case I should be suddenly taken from them, that is my chief anxiety now.”

It was remarkable that, in speaking of his daughters' future prospects, Mr. Basset, since his bankruptcy, had never once alluded to the subject of Claudia's marriage, which, till then, had been an almost every-day topic of conversation. Even in talking to Claudia herself, he spoke of the time to come without any

reference to her engagement, nor were the Ferndales ever mentioned by either of them. This had been observed by Mr. Ingleby every time he had been at Clapton, for this was not his first visit, but he had too much delicacy to notice it, and replied to Mr. Basset by making a proposition he had been contemplating ever since he received Mr. Ray's communication in the morning. It was to this effect. A small tenement called the Bridge House, the property of Mr. Ingleby, had become vacant by the death of the late occupant. It consisted of an old farm-house, some garden-ground and two fields adjoining another and larger farm, also belonging to Mr. Ingleby and tenanted by Mr. Ray, who, being in a flourishing condition, was desirous of adding those two fields to the land he already held; but he did not want to take the house and garden: therefore it occurred to Mr. Ingleby that it might afford at least a temporary asylum to the family in whose welfare he certainly felt a more than ordinary interest.

"I can very well afford to do this," he said to himself by way of excuse; "for if Ray takes the fields, I shall still be a gainer, as poor Burton had got out of the habit of paying his rent."

The generous proposal was made and freely accepted; for Mr. Basset, though a proud man in many respects, knew how to estimate a real act of friendship, and it was finally arranged that he and his daughters should take up their abode in Hampshire as soon as the house was ready for their reception.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Mr. Ingleby returned from Clapton he forthwith summoned his housekeeper, and requested her to see that a proper supply of needful apparel was packed into his portmanteau that evening for a three days' sojourn out of town; and accordingly, on the following morning he departed by an early train for Basingstoke, whence he proceeded in a fly through a beautiful part of the country, to a pleasant habitation called the Hill Farm, about eight miles from the town above-mentioned. It was an old-fashioned, but exceedingly comfortable farm-house, occupied by a personage of some notoriety in the county, and properly called Freshfield Ray, although equally well or perhaps better known by either of the soubriquets "Little John," or "the Hampshire giant." He was a young man, not more than six or seven-and-twenty, whose personal attributes had obtained for him the rather remarkable distinctive titles above-mentioned, inasmuch as he measured full five inches over six feet, and rejoiced in a frame of proportionate strength and breadth.

The heart enshrined in this colossal form was of the best quality, as no one could doubt who looked on

the frank, bright, open countenance of the young farmer, whose step was as light and movements as agile as those of a man not half his size or weight. But Mr. Ray had other claims to popularity besides these, for he was perfectly easy in his worldly circumstances, his father having died about two years before, leaving him in possession of a thriving farm held on a long lease, and of some three or four thousand pounds in consols, with other valuable property in lead mines. The elder Mr. Ray, a most worthy, but plain and illiterate man, had not considered it necessary to give his son a high education, but he had sent him to the grammar-school till he was fourteen, so that he had acquired some knowledge of the classics, a little French, and enough mathematics to make his father stare with wonder, and look upon him as a prodigy of learning. His later pursuits had not indeed been such as tended to the refinement of his habits or manners; still his mind was of no common order, and his ideas and feelings were those of a gentleman, however roughly they might at times be expressed. As it was many years since Mr. Ingleby had been in Hampshire, he had not seen young Ray since he was a small, shy school-boy, with a thin face and ungraceful gait, consequently he was unprepared for the sight of so striking a figure as the same individual now presented to his astonished eyes. At the moment of his introduction, Mr. Ray happened to be engaged in practically discussing the merits of a huge smoking dish of eggs and bacon, flanked on one side by a silver tankard of ale, and, on the other, by a black bottle and a wine-glass of capacious dimensions. Now, under these circumstances, the proper etiquette was to show the visitor into the best parlour where nothing of the kind was going on; but it chanced that, just as he reached the house-door and was about to knock, it was opened by a youth who looked marvellously like a plough-boy, with a thick slice of bread and a lump of cheese in his hand, his lips still exhi-

biting frothy signs of a recent draught of ale. To this young gentleman, Mr. Ingleby, addressed an inquiry as to whether Mr. Ray was at home, on which he pointed to a door, and said, with his mouth full of bread and cheese,—

“In there.”

Mr. Ingleby tapped gently at the door thus politely indicated, and was desired by a loud, clear, pleasant voice, to “come in,” so in he went, and the scene just described was revealed to his sight.

Mr. Ray was rather startled at being surprised in the midst of his repast by a stranger, but he guessed instantly who it was, and shaking hands with a good-humoured smile, bade him welcome. At the same moment, a female-voice was heard outside,—

“Whoy, Dick; how comed ye to show the gentleman in there? That be’ant manners.”

“Be’ant it?” was the reply. “What be manners, then?”

“The parlour, to be sure,” said the first speaker; to which the boy responded, “Oh,” and here the colloquy ended.

The young farmer coloured, but could not suppress his laughter, in which his visitor heartily joined, and being cordially invited to sit down, and partake of the good things on the table, he gladly accepted the proffered hospitality, having had nothing since an early breakfast in town.

“But this will not do for your dinner,” said the host; “I shall order something better to be ready at your usual hour, which I suppose is five or six o’clock.”

“By no means, I mean to make a most excellent dinner now, I assure you. But, my good young friend, I can hardly believe you are the little boy I used to see running about the fields some few years ago.”

“There’s rather more of me, I believe,” said the Colossus, laughing, and drawing himself up slightly,

as if proud of his vast proportions; and as Mr. Ingleby glanced at his fine athletic figure, he could not help remarking to himself,—

“He is really a splendid young fellow.”

Probably Mr. Ray saw what was passing in his mind, for a conscious smile played round his mouth at the instant which made his guest smile too, and from that moment a mutual warmth of friendly feeling subsisted between them. After dinner some excellent wine was produced, and the two gentlemen then began to talk over the business that had brought Mr. Ingleby into Hampshire, and in the course of conversation, he said,—

“Well, Ray, as you have made up your mind to take the two fields, I know what to do with the house, and shall send you down some very dangerous neighbours, so you will have to take care of yourself I can tell you.”

“Indeed, sir! Pray, what is the danger to be feared?”

“One not easy to guard against, for it will present itself in the shape of two very charming young ladies.”

“Oh! if that is all, I am afraid I shall be for courting the danger instead of guarding against it.”

“Spoken like a true hero,” said Mr. Ingleby, laughing; “but I beg you will remember that I gave you timely warning, so you must not blame me for any mischief that may ensue.”

He then proceeded to explain who the new neighbours were to be, and under what circumstances they were coming to reside at the Bridge House; suppressing, however, the fact, that they were to live rent free, to all which his auditor listened with the deepest attention.

“And now,” said Mr. Ingleby, “we must get this poor fellow, Burton, buried as soon as we can, for I shall stay at Basingstoke till all that business is over, that I may see what sort of state the house is in,

as I should like it to be put into tolerable condition before my friends come there."

"But, my dear sir, why should you stay at Basingstoke? There is plenty of room for you here, and I shall be very glad of your company if you can put up with the rough accommodation I am able to offer you. At any rate it will be more convenient to be on the spot, and I will make you as comfortable as I can."

Mr. Ingleby accepted this friendly offer without hesitation; and, in fact, he was so much pleased with the frankness and cordiality of his host, that he felt disposed to cultivate a more intimate acquaintance with him, especially as he had some idea of making frequent visits to that part of the country.

The late occupant of Bridge House was buried on the day but one following, and the next morning Mr. Ingleby went to survey the premises, which he found in a very dilapidated condition, and containing but little furniture beyond a few old-fashioned chairs covered with black horsehair, a hard sofa to match, and a mahogany dining-table, with a leaf hanging down on each side, which, when raised, was supported by the movement of one leg, an ingenious contrivance belonging to some remote period, when the arts and sciences of Great Britain were in their infancy. There was also, in the best room, a well-darned Kidderminster carpet, regarded as a choice specimen of luxury by the old servant of the house, and a looking-glass in a black frame over the chimneypiece. The old woman, whose name was Peggy, seemed to entertain a particular veneration for the last-mentioned pieces of antiquity, but more especially for the carpet, which might almost have been considered the production of her own skill and industry, as it was composed chiefly of the darns performed by her own hands during the last five-and-thirty years, there being only here and there a small patch of the original fabric remaining, showing colours that once had

been red and green, the sad and faded relics of its former splendour. Peggy, therefore, eyed this cherished memorial with pride and pleasure as she ushered Mr. Ingleby into the state apartment, which, she told him, had always been kept for the best room, and only used when there was company.

Peggy had lived in this house since her girlhood, and did not seem to have the least idea that her right of remaining on the premises was to be affected by any change of masters; consequently she talked of "cleaning up" against the arrival of "the new folks," and was perfectly astonished when the landlord, as she styled Mr. Ingleby, intimated that something more than cleaning up would be necessary previous to the coming of the fresh tenants.

Now Peggy was a fact on which Mr. Ingleby had not calculated, and it puzzled him exceedingly, inasmuch as he did not see clearly what was to be done with her; but from this difficulty he was relieved by Mr. Ray, who said that she was a faithful, good old creature, and so attached to the house that it would break her heart to leave it. He therefore proposed that she should continue to live there as a part of the domestic establishment, but that her chief business should be to attend to his dairy, and feed his poultry, in consideration of which services he would pay all the expenses of maintaining her; and as he had taken the land held by her late master, the field of her labours would be the same as heretofore, so that she would feel no change, and the Bassets would be relieved from the burden of keeping a supernumerary. Mr. Ingleby was very much pleased with this proposition, in which he perceived so much genuine kindness of heart that it fully confirmed him in the favourable opinion he already entertained of his new friend. One day, as they were strolling together over the farm, he said,—

"How is it, Ray, that you are not married?"

"Well, I don't know; the truth is, I have never

thought much about it; but I suppose I shall some of these days."

"I hope so, for I am convinced it is the best thing a man can do at your age, although unfortunately I cannot speak from experience."

"But, my dear sir, it is not too late to gain experience, is it?"

Mr Ingleby smiled.

"Perhaps not," he answered; "but I believe it is better to begin married life at an earlier period: men acquire selfish habits by living alone to my time of life; and I find now that whenever I turn my thoughts towards matrimony I feel afraid of the revolution it would inevitably cause in all my domestic arrangements."

"And the revolution is sure to be attended by a change of government," observed Mr. Ray, laughing; "I suppose that is what you object to?"

"Why, I must confess I like to have my own way—yet——" and here the speaker sighed. "Yet I often regret that I have neither son nor daughter to bestow my affections upon, for they sadly want a resting place,—I feel alone in the world. It is a mistake not to marry while you are a young man, depend upon it."

His companion answered with another merry laugh,—

"Ah! I see you will turn revolutionist after all," to which he responded, by a doubtful shake of the head; and here the conversation was interrupted by one of the farm labourers, nor was anything more said on the subject. The time passed so pleasantly that, at the end of a week, Mr. Ingleby was quite surprised to find he had been so long at the farm; nor did it require much eloquence on the part of his host to draw from him a promise that he would come down again very soon; and, in the meantime, Mr. Ray took upon himself the task of superintending the repairs that were to be done at the Bridge House.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. INGLEBY had not neglected to take steps for the discovery of Charles Basset; but they had proved unavailing, and the only conclusion his friends could come to was, that he had taken his passage to some foreign land in another name. It was about a week after his disappearance that Mr. Basset received the following letter:—

“MY DEAR SIR,

“It is with feelings of deep regret that, upon mature reflection, I have arrived at the painful conviction that it is my duty as a father, to communicate to you my sentiments on a subject that concerns us both equally as regards the interests of our children, which must be a source of anxiety to you as well as to myself, and I think you will see, with me, that it would not be to the advantage of either of them, to act upon an engagement formed with views which, under existing circumstances, cannot be carried out. I trust you will believe that I most sincerely lament the unfortunate occurrences that have placed us in this position with regard to each other, and I solemnly affirm that, were I a richer man, no such

considerations would for a moment counterbalance the esteem and regard I have always entertained for yourself and your family; but you must be well aware that, with three sons who have all to make their own way in the world, it is highly requisite that I should look to their means of doing so, and we all know that marriage entails serious expenses, and that men ought to consider how those expenses are to be met before they rush into them. Young people are apt to overlook these things; but you and I, as men of business, know very well that something more than love is required for the maintenance of a family, and I candidly tell you that Frank is not at present in a position to marry, without some prospect of pecuniary assistance beyond what I can afford him.

“It was my wish and intention to meet you on equal terms, and unless that could be the case, I certainly should not advise my son, and I think you would not advise your daughter, to plunge themselves into difficulties by an imprudent alliance. Frank is naturally reluctant to break a tie that he deems sacred. He considers it a point of honour to fulfil his pledge under any circumstances, and declares that nothing but the young lady's own desire could justify him in acting otherwise; still he cannot shut his eyes to the truth, and has consented to be guided entirely by the decision of your amiable daughter, in whose good sense and discretion he has the most perfect confidence. It may, perhaps, be many years before he is in a situation to ‘take unto himself a wife’—for the Bar is but a slow road to wealth, or even competence; nevertheless, if Miss Basset is willing to ‘bide the time,’ so be it; but if, on the contrary, she should think it desirable to free herself from an engagement that may be detrimental to her future prospects, he is ready to release her from it. With her, therefore, the matter now rests, and, pending this uncertainty, I think it is best they

should not meet. The same consideration prevents me also from having the pleasure of paying my respects to you in person, but I trust you will accept the assurance of my friendly regard, and believe me,

“Yours very truly,

“WILLIAM FERNDALÉ.”

It would be impossible to express the indignation of Mr. Basset as he perused this artfully-worded epistle. Anger, contempt, and wounded dignity by turns agitated his mind as he paced the narrow apartment with the open letter in his hand.

“What!” he muttered to himself, “is he afraid of damages? does he think I am fallen so low that I should bring my daughter’s name into a court of justice, and publish to the world the insult she has received? Does he suppose I do not see through this contemptible manœuvre? Does he think my child has so little pride or spirit as to set a price upon a husband, or hold his son to a contract he desires to break? How dares he to insult me with his professions of friendship! It is past all bearing!”

He was still in this excited state when Claudia entered the room, and seeing the letter, which he still held open in his hand, inquired with alarmed looks, whether he had heard of her brother.

“No,” he replied; “would to God I had. This is from Sir William Ferndale—not a pleasant communication, my child, either for you or for me—but, I trust, we shall both be able to treat it as it merits.”

Claudia turned very pale, but she said quietly,—

“I have expected this, dear father; I am quite prepared for it. May I see the letter?”

He gave it to her, and when she had read it, she returned it to him with a faint smile, saying,—

“There was little occasion for all this.”

“Little occasion for it, indeed!” her father replied.

"But do you not perceive their miserable motives, Claudia? Do you not see that, in the meanness of their worldly minds, they were afraid we should want them to pay damages for a breach of promise? They had the insolence to imagine that my daughter would go into a court of law to proclaim for the amusement of the public, that she was deserted by her lover, and that she valued his affections at so many hundred pounds."

Claudia's mild eyes flashed with indignation; and her whole countenance, usually so calm in its expression, betrayed emotions of anger and disdain that were quite foreign to her nature; still she had sufficient command over herself to say composedly,—

"You must reply to this, dear father—and I will write to Mr. Ferndale—a few words will do."

"You are right, my love; there need be no arguments, no reproaches,—they want such an answer as will protect them from the law, and they shall have it; three lines will suffice for that."

"I shall soon perform my part," said Claudia, as she left the room, and retired to her own with a firm resolution to perform without hesitation or delay the painful task of bidding a final adieu to one she had long regarded as the destined companion of her future life; and if she breathed a sigh or dropped a tear over the words traced by her own hand to sanction the desertion of him she had loved with a true and generous affection, she suffered no signs of regret to appear in the few brief lines that gave him his liberty.

In the meantime Mr. Basset, having recovered his equanimity, wrote the following laconic answer to Sir William's somewhat lengthy epistle.

"SIR,

"In answer to yours of the 15th instant, I beg to say that, from the date hereof, I shall consider

that no engagement whatever subsists between your son and my daughter.

“I have the honour to be, Sir,

“Your obedient servant,

“JAMES BASSET.”

He had scarcely finished this concise note, when Claudia returned, and laid hers on the table before him. He took it up, and read with unqualified approbation, these lines:—

“TO MR. FRANCIS FERNDALÉ.”

“Your father has addressed a letter to mine, in which he intimates that it is your wish the engagement between us should be at an end. It is at an end. I freely and unconditionally release you from your vows, and give you back that liberty which, happily for us both, is not sacrificed beyond recall. Nothing would ever have induced me to bind myself to you, but a firm belief in the sincerity of your affection. Undeceived on that point, I gladly withdraw my promise, and release you from yours. May you be happy.

“CLAUDIA BASSET.”

These two notes were despatched without delay, and then Mr. Basset embraced his daughter affectionately, and said,—

“Claudia, you have acted wisely and well. Your conduct has been exactly what I should have wished; and I think, my dearest child, we have cause to rejoice at having escaped from such a near connection with people so heartless and narrow-minded as these have proved themselves to be.”

Sir William and his son were highly elated at the complete success of their “ruse de guerre;” particularly the latter, who had reasons of his own for rejoicing, which he thought it prudent for the present to keep to himself.

Frank Ferndale had returned from the Continent a married man. He had met, in certain circles to which he had been introduced at Paris, a lady of great beauty, fascinating manners, and reputed wealth, who called herself the Countess Savelli, and passed for the widow of an Italian Count. She talked of her palace at Leghorn, and her villa on the banks of the Arno; she sang like a syren, and through the medium of soft songs, insinuated to Frank Ferndale that he had made an indelible impression on her heart. His vanity was gratified, his self-love was flattered; he believed, too, that he had now the chance of making a splendid alliance; and, in short, the enchantress threw her spells so artfully around him, that he was fairly caught, and in a moment of infatuation, trusting to a speedy emancipation from what he now termed his unfortunate thralldom, he offered her the hand which belonged of right to another, and it was at once accepted. They were privately married; but as Frank considered it prudent to keep his marriage secret for a time, he left his bride in Paris, and returned to London alone. Once or twice he ventured to eulogise the charming countess to his father, but Sir William, instead of sympathising in his rapturous admiration, told him he had better be on his guard against such people, or he would some day or other get taken in; and this opinion, so bluntly expressed, deterred him, even after the receipt of Claudia's farewell, from saying how far he really had gone, and even created unpleasant doubts in his own mind, as to whether he had acted with sufficient caution in an affair of such vital importance to his future prosperity.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was about this time that Major Gilmour, with his daughter, returned from Scotland, where he had been detained rather longer than he expected; and the first news he heard on his arrival was the downfall of the Basset family, of which, till then, he had been in ignorance. He received the intelligence with his usual coldness, expressing neither sorrow nor surprise; but Florence was both shocked and grieved at tidings so unexpected, and was impatient to see and condole with the sufferers, towards whom her heart now seemed to turn with redoubled affection.

On the following morning, therefore, not anticipating any objection on the part of her father, she mentioned her intention of going to call upon them, on which he elevated his eyebrows, with a slight expression of surprise, and said,—

“Pray, where do they reside now?”

“At Upper Clapton, sir; I have the address.”

“Indeed! You must have been amazingly prompt in your inquiries. And how do you propose getting to Clapton?”

“If I cannot have the carriage, sir, I can send for a fly.”

“As you please; but I should have thought a note might have answered the purpose just as well as going yourself. I do not exactly see the necessity of being in such haste to call.”

Florence made no reply, and the major took up the paper, but soon laid it down again; folded his arms on his breast, and with that austere look he was in the habit of assuming when his opinion differed from that of his daughter, said,—

“I should imagine, Florence, you will see the propriety of discontinuing the very close intimacy you rather unadvisedly commenced with that family, and which, you are aware, I did not quite approve of from the first.”

“I certainly was not aware, sir, that you objected to my visiting them.”

“I do not object to your making a call now and then. I intend myself to leave my card, but as to any further visiting, it will now be entirely out of the question. In fact, I should think, under the present circumstances, it would neither suit their means nor their inclinations.”

“They will not be able to give dinner parties, I dare say, sir; but they will be no less capable of friendship than before.”

“You are sentimental, I perceive. Most young ladies are so; but allow me to say, Miss Gilmour, that it would be more to your advantage to seek your friends amongst persons whose station is equal to your own.”

“I can do that, sir, without neglecting my cousins——”

At the mention of the word “cousins,” the major’s brow was instantly contracted, and he interrupted his daughter rather impatiently,—

“I think I have more than once stated that the relationship, which was on your mother’s side—not mine—is so very distant, that it scarcely amounts to any degree of affinity at all; at least, to none that

need be acknowledged. It would therefore oblige me, if you would drop the term cousins altogether."

"I have called them so hitherto, and surely this is not a time to make the difference."

"I think otherwise. We must, in this world, be governed by circumstances; and there are certain rules to be observed in society, and certain distinctions to be made, that are absolutely indispensable."

Major Gilmour had forgotten the time when he was glad to avail himself of Mr. Basset's superiority in wealth and station, and to acknowledge him, not only as a relative, but as a kind and liberal friend. These circumstances, however, were unknown to Florence; for the major had too much pride, and his former benefactor too much generosity, to speak of past favours, which the one desired to forget, and the other was too noble-minded to remember.

She therefore replied,—

"These are things I have yet to learn, sir—if, indeed, they must be learned; but, at present, I cannot help being governed in great measure by my own feelings."

Florence was joyfully received by the whole family at Clapton, and listened with affectionate interest to an account of all the events that had taken place during her absence, for she had heard only the simple facts without any of the details, and her sorrow and sympathy were both powerfully excited. She spoke very kindly of Charles, but in a manner that showed she entertained for him no feeling warmer than a friendly regard, which was a great disappointment to Emily, who even up to this time had cherished a romantic notion that, by some unlooked-for means, a union between her brother and Florence Gilmour would yet be brought about; for she had believed the attachment to be mutual, and was loth to part with this favourite delusion.

Florence remained with her friends nearly the whole morning, and before she left had contrived to impart to them some share of her own natural cheerfulness.

"When you are quite settled down in the country, Mr. Basset," she said, "you must let me come and stay with you a little while. Emily and I will be such good girls; we will learn to make butter and cheese, and feed the chickens; you cannot think how delighted I should be."

"My dear Miss Gilmour, you will always give more delight than you can possibly receive, I am quite sure; and we shall be only too happy in the hope of having so charming a guest."

"Very well, sir; I shall take you at your word, and consider myself fairly invited; so, about the merry month of May, you may look for me in Hampshire—that is, if my father goes to Vienna, as I expect he will, and does not want me to go with him."

"Then I most sincerely hope, my dear, he will go to Vienna, and will not want you to go with him. But there are more pleasant months in the year besides May, and we shall expect you to fulfil your promise at any rate before the summer is over."

Florence said that if she failed to do so, it certainly would not be her own fault—an assurance that was received with heartfelt pleasure; and as soon as she was gone, Emily exclaimed, with her usual vehemence,—

"What a noble girl she is! But I knew it. I was sure that if all the rest of the world deserted us, she would never change."

When Florence reached home it was near the dinner hour, and, hastening to her own room to dress, she was greeted by her maid with the unwelcome intelligence that Captain Romer had been in the library with the major for more than two hours, and was going to stay to dinner. This interview boded her no good; its purport she could scarcely doubt, and she foresaw that it was likely to lead to a

serious disagreement between herself and her father. It was some relief to her that two other gentlemen dined with Major Gilmour that day, and that none of the party left the dining-room till past ten o'clock, so that she had leisure to reflect on what was likely to happen, and make up her mind how to act.

When the gentlemen did appear in the drawing-room, Captain Romer seemed in high spirits; and if Florence had entertained any doubts as to the subject of his long conference with her father, they would have been dispelled when, in wishing her "good-night," he said in a peculiar and low tone of voice,—

"I shall have the honour of seeing you to-morrow morning, Miss Gilmour."

Captain Romer had as much vanity as most men, and a vast deal more than many of greater merit, yet he could not be wholly insensible to the glaring fact, that Florence showed no disposition whatever to favour his pretensions; but he was neither discouraged nor disquieted by this circumstance; for, in calculating the chances of success, he gave so much weight to the influence of the major's arbitrary character, that he felt satisfied the odds were considerably in his favour, and was perfectly easy as to the issue of his suit.

The next morning Major Gilmour, with great formality, informed his daughter that he had received on her account a proposal of marriage from Captain Romer, at the same time giving her to understand that, as he considered it as an offer in every respect eligible, he expected that she would raise no objections.

"Lord Merrington," he said, "is a man not likely to live many years; the estates are entailed, and his nephew's claim to the succession is indisputable. In short, there is nothing whatever to object to, and I should wish the necessary arrangements to be made as soon as possible."

Florence, who had been silent during the whole of

this harangue, now said very quietly, but in a decided manner,—

“Any arrangements, sir, with a view to a marriage between me and Captain Romer, would be superfluous, as it never can take place.”

“Never can take place? I do not exactly comprehend your meaning.”

“I mean, sir, that I have so little regard for Captain Romer, that no consideration will ever induce me to marry him.”

“This is frivolous, Miss Gilmour; childish in the extreme. What can possibly be your objection to so desirable an alliance?”

“Simply this, sir. I do not like the man; his manners are disagreeable to me, and his character, so far as I am acquainted with it, is such as I cannot approve.”

“His manners are those of a gentleman, I apprehend; and his character is, I suppose, much like that of other single men of good expectations. Such scruples are, in reality, of no importance whatever, with reference to a contract of this nature, where there are the advantages of a peerage and a good estate. These are considerations not to be lightly passed over.”

“Nor do I pass over them lightly; my reasons are sufficiently weighty, for it would be a heavy infliction, indeed, to be compelled to pass my whole life with a man whose company, even for a single day, I would always rather avoid.”

“The cases are not analogous. In contracting a marriage, you fix your future position in the world; and not only your own, but that of your descendants, consequently of mine; therefore it is not to be considered as a mere matter of taste as regards the choice of a companion, but as an act of importance which may either elevate or degrade your family. If I had been fortunate enough to have a male heir, any connection you might form would be of comparatively

little consequence, but as it is, I shall take care that no girlish folly interferes with my views in a matter that so materially concerns myself."

Florence's spirit had been rising higher and higher with every word of this cold and calculating address; and when it was concluded she said, with a flushed face and trembling lip,—

"Do you mean, sir, that I am to be disposed of, like a slave, to the highest bidder, without any regard to my own inclinations?"

"I mean," replied her father sternly, "that if you have so little judgment as not to see what is the proper course for you to pursue, I must judge for you, and, in short, I have given my word, and will not retract it."

"Surely," said Florence, bursting into tears, "this is an exertion of authority that borders on tyranny."

"You may give it what name you please, Miss Gilmour, but it is an authority I have a right to exercise, and I intend to do so for your benefit as well as for my own."

Florence was about to reply, but he stopped her by saying,—

"It is useless to argue the question any further—my mind is made up, and it is my will that you receive Captain Romer as the man I have chosen for my son-in-law. If you refuse to ratify the engagement I have entered into, the consequences may be such as you little expect, and repentance will then come too late."

Having spoken this threat, he abruptly left the room, and Florence soon afterwards heard him go out. For some time she remained in deep and anxious thought. Accustomed as she had always been to her father's overbearing temper, she was scarcely prepared for such selfish disregard of her happiness as he had now shown, and began to foresee more serious consequences to herself from her rejection of the

proposed alliance than she had hitherto contemplated ; yet her repugnance to it was so much increased by this very anticipation that it amounted to positive disgust, and she could not help hating one who, contemptible as he was in himself, seemed to hold her destiny completely in his power. Her father's last words were ambiguous, but that they had a meaning she did not for an instant doubt, for he was not a man to speak at random, and she saw there would be some great evil to endure ; but nothing could be worse than this hateful marriage, which, at all hazards, she resolved not to consent to.

Disagreeable as the approaching interview was to her, she thought it better not to avoid it, and therefore took her work, and awaited as composedly as she could her expected visitor, who very soon made his appearance, and took a seat by her side with that easy confidence which betokened a feeling of security that would in any case have been unfavourable to his cause, but under the present circumstances was both presumptuous and offensive.

He began to play with her silks and make trifling observations on the work she was engaged upon, to which she replied as briefly as possible, desirous that he should come to the point at once, that she might bring the affair to a speedy termination. At length, weary of his frivolous remarks, and fearing that he was not going to give her an opportunity of explaining her sentiments to him that morning, she opened the subject herself, to his very great surprise, by saying,—

“ I understand, Captain Romer, you had some conversation with my father yesterday relative to me, and I am anxious you should know at once that his views and mine, with regard to the proposition you have been pleased to make, are so entirely different, that any explanation on your part to me would be superfluous, and I hope my candour will be the means of saving you unnecessary trouble.”

Romer was so utterly disconcerted at this unex-

pected address, that for a few moments he was unable to make any reply to it, but, soon recovering his self-possession, he began to pour forth a volley of protestations as to the ardour and sincerity of his love, and the admiration with which she had inspired him from the first moment he beheld her. All that such lovers say on such occasions he said; but it produced no other effect than that of exercising the patience of the listener, who offered no interruption, nor responded in any way, until he entreated her to recall what she had, as he expressed it, so cruelly said, and allow him to hope for a kinder answer.

She then said very quietly that anything he could urge would be of no avail, that her sentiments were not likely to change, and that further discussion would therefore be useless as well as unpleasant.

Mortification, disappointment, and suppressed resentment were visible in every feature of the rejected suitor. His pride and vanity were both deeply wounded; and, what was worse, his hope of speedy relief from pecuniary embarrassments that were becoming every day more difficult to contend with, were crushed for the present by this unlooked-for refusal. If Florence had betrayed any signs of emotion, if her lip had trembled, or her cheek had flushed, he would not have felt his case hopeless, but the cool indifference with which his declaration had been received, made it sufficiently clear, even through the mist of vanity that generally obscured his mental vision, that he had very little chance of success beyond what he might gain from parental authority. On this he still relied, and said, half sullenly, half scornfully,—

“You are aware, Miss Gilmour, that my pretensions are honoured with your father’s approbation, and that being the case, you cannot be surprised if I should not very easily resign them. Time may, perhaps, alter your present sentiments, and——”

"If you choose to deceive yourself, Captain Romer," said Florence, interrupting him, "the fault is not mine. I tell you explicitly that my sentiments will never change, therefore it would be far better for your own sake, even more than for mine, that you should withdraw your proposal, for it can only end in disappointment."

"I cannot," he replied with some vehemence. "I cannot, and I will not—so long as the least hope remains."

"That is to say, so long as there is a chance that my father's will may force me to act contrary to my own inclinations—I thank you, sir—I know now what I shall have to contend with, and shall be prepared for it; if my resolution had not already been fixed and unalterable, your present conduct, unworthy as it is of a gentleman and a man of honour, would have made it so."

In saying these words she rose and was leaving the room, when he made an effort to detain her by taking her hand, which was instantly withdrawn, as she said with a haughtiness she seldom assumed,—

"Excuse me, Captain Romer, if I decline to hold any further conversation with you on a subject which you seem disposed to render as disagreeable to me as possible. Good morning, sir."

And with a slight courtesy she quitted the room.

"What a bore!" he muttered to himself, as he took up his hat; "a precious deal of trouble I shall have, I suppose; but the governor's will is law, that's quite certain, and he will never stand much of this. It may cause some delay, but it must be all right in the end."

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN ROMER dined that day at his club, and having imbibed a sufficient quantity of champagne to elevate him several degrees above his ordinary temperament, called at the lodgings of one of his intimate associates, where he found several others, all belonging to a certain set, smoking cigars, and holding a debate on the knotty point of how it would be most expedient to pass away the hours till midnight.

"I'm for billiards," said one.

"That won't do for me, then," responded another, "for I've got a confounded sprain of the wrist; so, if you decide for billiards, I'm off."

"Suppose we all stay here, then," said Romer, "and try our luck at loo."

This proposal was unanimously applauded, cards were produced, bottles and glasses put on a side table, and the whole party sat down to play at unlimited loo.

In his present frame of mind, Romer was glad of the excitement, and played so recklessly, that, at the end of one hour, he had lost no less a sum than one hundred and twenty pounds.

Heated with wine, and enraged at such an extra-

ordinary run of ill luck, he rose from the table in a violent passion, declaring there must have been unfair play, on which the principal winner insisted upon knowing what he meant, and at whom his observation was levelled.

"At you, if you choose to take it," answered Romer.

"Then this is levelled at you!" exclaimed the other, in a fury, at the same time seizing an empty decanter, and throwing it with such force at Romer's head, that, if he had not sprung back very adroitly, it must have inflicted a much more serious injury than it did; but, as it was, it bruised his temple rather severely.

Recovering himself in a moment, however, he darted like a tiger on his assailant, and a fierce scuffle ensued, but the rest interfered between them, and they were at length, with some difficulty, separated.

"'Pon my soul, I wish you would behave like gentlemen, if you come here," said the host; "this isn't pleasant, 'pon my soul!"

"Who do you accuse of not behaving like a gentleman?" said Romer, turning fiercely upon him.

"Why, you, for one; and I say again, it's devilish ungentlemanly, 'pon my soul!"

"I'm ready to prove myself a gentleman at any time you choose to name," vociferated the captain, in a violent rage.

"Pooh! nonsense! I am not going to fight with you."

"Then you are a coward!"

"You are a fool, and not very sober; so I think you had better go home and go to bed, 'pon my soul."

"I am sober; and I won't go till every one of this company acknowledges that I am a gentleman!"

"Then I fancy you will have to stay here for the rest of your life," said one of the party, laughing

heartily at his own witticism, which would certainly have caused another affray, had not the utterer of the jest prudently withdrawn himself from the scene of action; and, shortly afterwards, Captain Romer was prevailed upon to betake himself to his hotel, having repeatedly hurled defiance at every individual present, and valorously reiterated his determination to challenge each of them in turn, and vindicate his claim to the character of a gentleman by a series of single combats.

In the morning, he awoke with a violent headache, and a dim recollection of the events of the preceding night, amongst which the most prominent was that of his heavy loss, which was rather a serious affair to him just at this time, as he had several other debts of honour to discharge, and wanted money besides to go on with. His only resource, in this dilemma, was a fresh mortgage on his estate, and this he resolved to effect at any sacrifice, trusting that he should soon be in a condition to redeem it if he thought proper.

In pursuance of this plan, he presented himself, without delay, at the office of Messrs. Lloyd and Dobson, solicitors, who had transacted business of a similar nature for him before, and to whom he now applied for fifteen hundred pounds, in addition to sums already advanced on the same security.

Now these gentlemen were fair dealing, honourable men, who, although they did not object to invest money in a profitable manner, were not of that class who are ready to take advantage of the necessities of thoughtless, extravagant young men, who, like Esau, rashly barter their future hopeful prospects for the convenience of the passing hour. Mr. Dobson, a business-like man of few words, listened to Captain Romer's proposition with profound gravity, merely saying at intervals, "oh," "ah," "yes," "exactly," and other expletives, which usually formed his share of a dialogue with any one of his clients, as they answered

all the purposes of showing he was not asleep, while they gave not the smallest insight into his thoughts or opinions about any matter on which he was consulted. His answer, with regard to the present business was, that he could say nothing at all about it until he had consulted his partner, who was out of town, and would not be back for three days; consequently, Romer left the office in a very discontented mood.

"One might as well try to get honey out of a dry crust, as a single word to go upon from that cautious old fellow," he muttered, as he walked down the street; "a blessed thing to be sure, to have to wait three days, and not be certain of getting it done after all.—The money I must have, at all events, and if Dobson would tell me whether they would do it or not, I should know what to do; but there's nothing for it now but to wait and see."

On the fourth day he went again, and then he saw Mr. Lloyd, a lively, shrewd-looking little man, with a more voluble tongue than his grave coadjutor.

"I should not advise you to do this," he said; "the estate is already deeply mortgaged, and the sum you now want is the utmost that can be raised upon it. It would be imprudent; in fact, we would rather not do it."

"Then I must find somebody that will," replied Romer; "for I must have money at once, and the security is good enough, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes! there is no objection to the security; but I tell you fairly, that, if we take this mortgage on your terms, and you are not able to redeem the property in one year from this time, we shall foreclose, and you will then have parted with it for less than two thirds of its value."

"I don't care what the deuce you mean to do a year hence, provided you assist me now; besides, I shall be able to redeem the estate long before that time, I am quite sure of that."

"A matrimonial scheme, I suppose?"

"Exactly; an Indian heiress—thirty thousand down, and a mine of wealth in prospect."

"Is it a settled thing, then?"

"As good as settled; so you may wish me joy."

"Time enough to do that when you are actually married; it would be premature, even at the church-door, for 'there's many a slip'—you know the old adage?"

"Oh! confound old adages; you know very well, Mr. Lloyd, these two or three paltry fields cannot be of much importance to me in the long run."

"Indeed, Captain Romer, I do not know any such thing; the most that either you or I can say on that point is, that present appearances certainly may warrant such a belief."

"A true lawyer to the back-bone," said the captain, laughing; "why, I really believe you would doubt whether a bird was alive, even though you saw him fly."

"At least he might be shot before he reached any great height," replied the man of law, drily.

"Possibly," answered Romer; "but that has nothing to do with the present question; so let us settle it at once, if you please,—will you let me have the money, or not?"

"You understand the conditions; we must insert a clause in the deed respecting the foreclosure."

"Insert as many clauses as you like, I shall not trouble my head about them;—when can I have the amount?"

"To-morrow, if you are in a hurry for it."

This answer suited Captain Romer exceedingly well, and he left the solicitor's office in high spirits, not fearing that he should now be able to go on with tolerable ease till Florence was brought to consent to the marriage, which, he had little doubt, she would be obliged to do eventually.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was a brilliant day in the early part of June, the sun was shining in a deep, cloudless sky, the trees were clothed in their richest array, and all the loveliest flowers were blooming, when Mr. Basset, with his two daughters and his excellent friend Mr. Ingleby, arrived at the Bridge House.

No day more favourable than this could have been selected from the whole range of the calendar to give the refugees a pleasant impression of their new abode, which had assumed a very different appearance from that which it presented on the occasion of Mr. Ingleby's former visit; for, besides the advantage of bright sunshine and summer verdure, Mr. Ray had bestowed the greater part of his time, and put in requisition his best taste, to embellish the house and garden by every means in his power, both natural and artificial. The domicile had, by Mr. Ingleby's desire, been repaired and newly furnished in a plain but comfortable manner; and it now stood embowered amidst the luxuriant foliage of trees and shrubs that had been newly planted; and the front was covered with roses and clematis that clustered round the windows and adorned the trellised portico. The

grass-plot in front had been newly turfed, and studded with beds of the brightest flowers of the season; and, in short, the late neglected, unsightly piece of ground, teeming with dirt, weeds, and marigolds, was converted into a beautiful garden, small, it is true, but filled with bright hues and delicious odours.

Mr. Ingleby saw with pleasure the improvements that had been made, which were far beyond anything he could have expected, and gratified him exceedingly as proofs of the friendliness of the young farmer towards both himself and the future inmates of the Bridge House. He foresaw that such a neighbour as Freshfield Ray might be an inestimable benefit to a family situated as the Bassets were, and thought he could not do better than bring them together as soon as possible, that something like an intimacy might be established between them before he went back to town.

Mr. Basset needed social intercourse more than ever, for he had now lost all hope of hearing anything of Charles, and had sunk into a state of despondency in consequence, from which nothing could arouse him. Time, instead of healing the wound, seemed to make it still deeper, and he would sit for hours with his thoughts bent on distant lands, wondering in what spot, and in what circumstances, the fugitive then might be. Had they been separated by death the case would have been different, for then he would have known that by death alone they could be reunited; but while there remained the possibility that they might meet again on this side of the grave it was the constant subject of his meditations.

Emily had recovered in great measure her natural vivacity, but whenever she spoke of Charles the tears would spring to her eyes, and her voice tremble with emotion; nor could even the excitement of new scenes and new occupations teach her to forget, or think with less of regret, on the brother she had always loved so fondly.

It was past six o'clock when the party arrived at the Bridge House, and old Peggy, who had been at the garden-gate full half an hour watching anxiously for them, had set out the tea-table with extraordinary magnificence, according to her simple notions, for it was covered with a white cloth and spread with home-baked loaves, both white and brown, butter newly churned, fresh-laid eggs, ham, cakes, cream, and a number of *et ceteras* in the shape of marmalade, preserved fruits, and other dainties: all which, it appeared upon inquiry, had been sent from the Hill Farm to do honour to the arrival of the strangers.

This fact was revealed by Peggy, who, with divers curtsies and speeches of welcome, had taken upon herself to usher her new master and mistresses into the state apartment, which she had on this grand occasion converted into a banqueting-room.

"Well, now, this is kind and neighbourly of young Ray," said Mr. Ingleby, surveying the well-furnished table with evident satisfaction; "he's a very pleasant fellow, I assure you, and I shall be glad to introduce him to your acquaintance."

Mr. Basset said as he had furnished the feast the least they could do was to invite him to partake of it, to which Mr. Ingleby replied,—

"A very good idea, and if Miss Basset will permit me I will run over to the farm and ask him."

Claudia readily acquiesced, and Mr. Ingleby took up his hat for that purpose; but as he was leaving the room he turned back and said to Emily,—

"I must give you a friendly caution, Miss Emily, for I know you are rather wickedly inclined. My friend is a very worthy fellow, but he is a remarkably little man, and like many diminutive people is particularly sensitive on that point, therefore you must not laugh at his innocent endeavours to make the most of himself."

"Certainly not, Mr. Ingleby; how can you imagine I should be so ungrateful! I would not laugh,

for the world, though he may be no bigger than Tom Thumb."

"Very well, that's a bargain; so now I shall proceed without fear or scruple;" and away he went in search of Freshfield Ray, enjoying the joke he was perpetrating as much as any schoolboy would have done; and as soon as he was gone, Claudia asked her father how he liked the place.

"It is a much prettier place than I expected, my love."

"It is a perfect little paradise," said Emily; "I am sure we shall be very happy here."

Her father sighed and shook his head, for between him and happiness there ever interposed the same dark cloud that shed its gloom equally over the present and the future; the cloud that threatened to darken all his days, and overshadow his passage to the tomb. During the first half-hour of his residence in the house he was henceforth to call his home his thoughts dwelt with painful intensity on the novelty of his situation; for, however the voice of friendship might soften down the fact, he could not help feeling that his new abode was an almshouse, and that he came to it as an object of charity. It was not on his own account he felt this truth so keenly, for sorrow had taught him humility; but he thought of Norman, his high-minded, noble-hearted son: Norman, who had been brought up with the ideas and expectations of a gentleman, how would he bear to see his father and his sisters dependent for a house on the benevolence of a stranger? But mingled with these reflections came others of a brighter hue, for he thought of his gentle, loving daughter, whose affectionate cares had soothed and cheered him through all his trials; he remembered, too, that he had found a friend when he most needed one, and acknowledged that, upon the whole, he still had much to be thankful for. In the meantime, Emily had been making what she called a voyage of discovery to the Arctic regions, or, as Mr.

Ingleby afterwards translated it, to the attic regions, while Claudia was busily engaged in preparing the tea.

"These gentlemen are very long in coming," said Emily; "perhaps Mr. Ingleby cannot persuade his little friend to show himself. I wonder if he is visible to the naked eye, or whether we shall need a microscope."

But her doubts were speedily set at rest, for, almost at the same moment, Mr. Ingleby walked into the room followed by the Hampshire giant, at the sight of whom Emily uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise, which made him laugh and colour violently, for he knew the cause of it, and was highly amused at the startling effect he had produced. There could not have been a better time chosen for the introduction of Mr. Ray than that precise moment, when he first appeared to the astonished eyes of his new friends in all the glory of six feet and a half good measure.

An old-fashioned English tea-table is a wonderful incentive to social intercourse, and it is a pity that it should have become almost obsolete, for the tea-table here meant bears no affinity to the thing so called in these days, where the presiding goddess sits in state before an elegant urn in which water is never known to boil, and dispenses cups of lukewarm beverage dignified with the name of tea, or of a muddy brown cold liquid, excessively unpleasant to the taste, erroneously called coffee, the same being accompanied by wafers and other small eatables that a puff of wind might blow away.

But the tea-drinking it is now our business as well as pleasure to record, was a repast worthy of the olden time, and under its genial influence the stranger guest soon felt himself perfectly at home, and quite at his ease. Emily did not altogether recover from the embarrassment occasioned by the unpremeditated "Good gracious!" that had escaped her on his first

entrance; but as this was rather flattering to him than otherwise, it made her, of course, more interesting in his eyes, and he contrived to say as many agreeable things as the time would allow, for he had too much delicacy to make this first visit a long one.

"Well, Ray, how do you like your neighbours?" said Mr. Ingleby, as they walked back together to the farm.

"As far as I have seen at present, sir, I like them very much. The young ladies are both very handsome—don't you think so?"

"Yes, they are pretty girls—very pretty—and sensible girls too—but what I like about them is, they are not always on the watch to catch husbands."

"Do ladies commonly spend their time in that unprofitable manner?"

"I question whether they find it so unprofitable as you may imagine," replied Mr. Ingleby, laughing, "for men are sad flats sometimes; and, what is worse, the women know it."

"Very alarming, certainly; however, I am glad you do not suspect these ladies of being disposed to take advantage of such a dangerous state of things."

"No, no, there's nothing of the sort there, I truly believe. I am glad you like the family, for I am anxious they should be comfortable here; and, in a place like this, the comfort of persons so entirely unaccustomed to the habits of a country life must depend in great measure on their neighbours."

"I will do my best to make the country pleasant to them," said Mr. Ray, "but I am a very rough fellow, and I fear these young ladies, who have been used to better society, will hardly tolerate my unpolished manners."

"I dare say they have sense enough to value a diamond in the rough," replied Mr. Ingleby, "even if it were so; but Nature can polish as well as art,

and though her work may be less showy, it is of more intrinsic worth."

Mr. Ray was highly gratified by this compliment, which he sincerely believed to be beyond his merits; and, in so believing, gave one of the best proofs he could give that it was not so.

CHAPTER XVII.

UNDAUNTED by the repulse he had met with, Captain Romer continued his visits to Belgrave Square, and dined nearly every day with Major Gilmour, whose countenance and support emboldened him to force his attentions upon Florence to a most annoying extent; yet she could not altogether avoid treating him with that courtesy which was due to every one of her father's guests, however disagreeable they might be to herself. He had not ventured to say another word on the subject of his suit, so that she had no opportunity of repeating her protestation against it; but his whole manner was so offensively confident that it was quite obvious he considered the major's word a sufficient guarantee for the completion of his wishes. Florence was very much provoked, for she saw that she was treated as a mere cipher in the affair both by her father and her lover, that her coldness was considered of no importance, and that they were acting just as if her consent had been obtained. She almost wished that her father would say something to her on the subject, but he did not, and she was unwilling to begin it herself, knowing that it must inevitably lead to serious disagreement.

Thus several weeks passed away, when Major Gilmour was obliged to go to Vienna, a journey he had for some time expected he should have to make, as the business that called him there could not be settled without his actual presence.

Florence was extremely anxious to take this opportunity of paying a visit to the Bassets, and as she was really ill from nervous irritation, and her medical adviser had recommended change of air, she mentioned to her father that she should like to spend the time of his absence in Hampshire; and, to her great surprise as well as pleasure, he made very little objection. The truth was, he thought it would be wiser to leave her in a secluded country village, where she would see nobody, than at home, where she would have the opportunity of receiving invitations, and going, without him to keep a watch over her, into society, that might be dangerous to his views.

These considerations induced him to give permission for the proposed visit; but it was given ungraciously enough; for, never losing sight of his own dignity, he contrived to impart an air of patronage to his daughter's projected sojourn at the house of Mr. Basset, by affecting to consider it a matter of 'board and lodging' that was to be paid for, thus giving it the appearance of an obligation conferred instead of received.

This view of the case was rather embarrassing to Florence, who had not contemplated any difficulty of that kind till she was startled by the following question,—

"Have you made any arrangement as to terms?"

"Terms, sir!" she echoed, with evident astonishment.

"Yes, certainly—you do not suppose I should allow you to live for three or four weeks at the expense of people who can so ill afford it, do you?"

"I really have not thought about it, sir; and I am afraid they would be very much hurt at such a proposition."

"For what reason?" asked the major, elevating his eyebrows with a look expressive of wonder and contempt—"I really do not comprehend——" and he seemed to wait, as if expecting some explanation; but Florence made no reply, for she knew very well that, as he did not choose to comprehend, it would be utterly useless to argue the point, and might, probably, have the effect of causing him to withdraw his consent; therefore, she adopted the wiser course of saying nothing, except, that if he wished it, no doubt such an arrangement might be made.

"Of course I wish it—I am really surprised you should for a moment entertain any other idea; and, remember, it is my particular desire the payment should be sufficiently liberal to do away with any appearance of obligation on my part."

"I am quite sure——" Florence began; but whatever she was about to affirm, her father put a stop to it by saying in his cold, sententious manner,—

"We will avoid discussion, if you please, Miss Gilmour. It would be unfitting for either you or me to be indebted to persons so circumstanced; and I expect that, if you think proper to indulge in any romantic notions respecting equality, and all that sort of thing, you will take care not to compromise me, however you may lose sight of your own position in society."

"Oh! this eternal harping upon position," Florence said to herself with a sigh; "who would not rather be the meanest peasant breathing, than have any pretensions to rank or consequence if they are to banish all sympathy and friendly feeling!"

She refrained, however, from giving utterance to these thoughts, and soon retired to write a letter to Claudia, a task she could not easily accomplish to her

satisfaction under the imposed restrictions; and the difficulty was how to treat the subject so as to make it as little mortifying as possible.

"Surely," she said, "there might have been some better means suggested of making ample return, than this indelicate mode of paying for bread and meat; I cannot bear to think of it.—What am I to say?—How can I propose it to them?" At length after much anxious deliberation, she concluded that the best way would be to state without reserve the conditions on which her father had consented that she should pay this visit, and to beg they would not refuse to receive her on account of his peculiarities, for which she was in no way answerable.

"I trust, dear Claudia," she said, "you will let him have his way; and that no scruples on your part will deprive me of the pleasure I have so long looked forward to, for I do not know how I should be able to bear the disappointment."

In her reply Claudia wrote, "I wish, dearest Florence, this could have been otherwise, for my father is much hurt, and could scarcely be prevailed upon to agree to this strange proposal; but the happiness of having you with us is far too great to be sacrificed to what may, after all, be only false pride; therefore let it be so, and we shall look for your arrival with impatience."

Three days after the receipt of this letter, Florence arrived at the Bridge House, attended by Major Gilmour's coachman, who was to sleep at Basingstoke, and return to town on the next morning. As the time of her coming was uncertain, Claudia was out walking with Mr. Basset, but Emily was at home, and the moment the chaise drove up to the gate, she flew in a transport of joy to welcome her beloved friend, who returned her affectionate embrace with equal warmth.

"Oh, Florence! I am so delighted to see you!"

"And I am quite as much pleased to see you, dear

Emmy—What a sweet place this is! But where is Claudia, and how is your papa? You did not expect me so soon, I dare say."

"Not for these two hours; but it is all the better—Claudia and papa are out; they are only gone into the village, and will not be long—but there is somebody here you will be surprised to see; so come in, and let me have the satisfaction of being the first to introduce you."

Florence had no time to form any conjecture as to who it might be that was to occasion a surprise, for she had already reached the parlour-door which Emily threw open as she finished speaking, when her companion beheld with unspeakable astonishment, and not without pleasurable emotion, the young curate of Bleachley, who was now introduced to her by the delighted Emily as her brother, Norman Basset.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM his early boyhood Norman Basset had evinced a decided inclination for the sacred profession of which he was now a member; and it was at his own earnest desire he had been educated for the church, having been sent with that view, first to Eton and then to Oxford, where he had gone through the usual course with great credit, and taken his first degree with high honours.

As soon as he was qualified to act as a minister of the gospel, he accepted a temporary appointment to a small curacy in Nottinghamshire, as it was his father's intention, when he had taken full orders, to put him into a good living, and Mr. Basset was actually negotiating for the purchase of a benefice worth from six to seven hundred a year, when the proceedings were stopped by that fatal calamity, which, in ruining his own fortunes, involved those of his son also.

Norman was eminently qualified for the path he had chosen. Religious both in principle and feeling, he was prepared to fulfil the duties of his vocation in the true spirit of Christianity; yet he was by no

means insensible to worldly advantages, and felt happy in contemplating the bright prospect before him, until it was so suddenly and cruelly overcast.

On the day he met with Florence Gilmour at Mrs. Allen's cottage, he had not yet received intelligence of the accident that had reduced his family to poverty. His visions of the future were still unclouded, and their brilliancy was heightened by the transient view with which chance had favoured him of the beautiful girl, who had appeared to his charmed eyes in the attractive form of a ministering angel. On that occasion he had not heard her name; but, on the following day, to his infinite surprise and pleasure he learned from Dr. Lawford that she was his own near relative, and the most intimate friend of his sisters, who had often mentioned her in their letters to him in such high terms that, until he saw her, he believed the picture to be overdrawn; but now his own imagination gave it a still deeper colouring. For two days the face, the form, the voice of Florence Gilmour were constantly present to his mind, and he looked forward impatiently to the time which was now drawing near, when he was to resign his present engagement to the son of the vicar, who had just left college, and join his family in London. A crowd of blissful thoughts mingled with the anticipation of his approaching visit to the great Metropolis, where he had not been for three years; but the bright dream was short-lived as most bright dreams, alas! are destined to be, for scarcely had it taken possession of his fancy when the letter came that told the fatal news of the fire, with all its disastrous consequences, and poor Norman found himself suddenly hurled from the height on which he had stood, and left with nothing better to look forward to than a life of poverty and labour. The blow was severe, yet he gave only a passing thought to his own hopes thus scattered to the winds; it was for his father, his mother, his

sisters, that he grieved ; and for his brother too, the unhappy author of the calamity.

“Poor Charles !” he said, “what are my troubles to his ? for I have only to bear the misfortune itself, whilst he has the additional sorrow of having caused it.”

The letters that Norman wrote to every one of his family on this trying occasion were very beautiful. There was not a single word in allusion to his own disappointed expectations, but every line spoke comfort in the present hour of affliction, and trustful hope for the future. To Charles he wrote,—

“Do not blame yourself too severely, dear Charles ; for how do we know, but that this seeming misfortune may have been ordained for some wise purpose, only known to the Great Ruler of all human events ? We cannot see into futurity, and it maybe that what we lament as an evil, is only a link in the chain of circumstances that is leading to some good end.”

It must not, however, be supposed that Norman was indifferent to the altered state of his affairs, for indifference is one thing, resignation is another ; the latter being the effect of true religion on a well-regulated mind, the former of that apathy which is alike reckless of misfortune, and unthankful for benefits. The young curate became graver, and more thoughtful than before ; he mixed less in society, and devoted all his leisure time to writing and studying works of divinity. The intelligence of his mother's death, of his brother's disappearance, and all the subsequent events that took place, were communicated to him by Claudia, who was his principal correspondent, and frequently, in her letters, made mention of Florence Gilmour ; but Norman, in his replies, never once spoke of his accidental meeting with Florence, who consequently remained in ignorance of the fact that he and the curate she had seen at Bleachley were one and the same person. Sometimes, wearied with study, the youthful divine found himself meditating on what he might have been if fate had not so cruelly

interposed a barrier between him and the dream of happiness in which he had for a moment indulged ; but he always endeavoured to shake off such thoughts, as being at variance with his own principles and precepts.

“ Is it for me,” he said, “ to teach submission to the will of Providence, yet presume to repine at it myself ? The weight of this burden has not fallen so heavily on me as it has on those whose happiness ought to be dearer to me than my own, and I will at least bear my part cheerfully.”

It was soon after the Bassets were settled at the Bridge House that Norman had to give up his curacy, and he arrived in London about the same time that Mr. Ingleby returned from Hampshire. He would gladly have retained the situation he had held even for the small stipend of seventy pounds a year ; but that was out of the question, for the rector's son had already come home, and was waiting impatiently for the vacancy. He therefore came to town, and having business that might detain him for two or three weeks, he engaged a single room in a small street at Camden Town, where, for a consideration of twelve shillings per week, he was to be accommodated with bed and breakfast. It must be confessed that neither bed nor board were of first-rate quality, but he had been so liberal in distributing parting tokens of kindness amongst the poor people of the village where he had officiated, that his purse was much lighter to carry than it would have been, had his heart been of sterner mould ; he was therefore obliged to confine his expenses within very narrow bounds, and he did not give himself much concern about the hardness of his mattress or the coarseness of his sheets, as they were tolerably clean, and his landlady not very uncivil, although she gave a shrewd guess that his circumstances were not in a flourishing condition.

Norman's object in remaining in town was to try to dispose of the product of his literary labours, consisting

chiefly of sermons, written expressly for the benefit of rustic congregations. He called on several publishers without success, but at length he met with one who consented to look over the manuscripts, and when Norman went to him a few days afterwards, he not only agreed to purchase those, but engaged to take a certain number of similar discourses within a given time; and, although the price offered was small, it was a great relief to the author to know that, in waiting for other occupation, he should be making enough money at least to cover all the expenses of his maintenance as long as he remained at home. This business being settled to his satisfaction, he was proceeding through the Regent's Park to his lodging to pack up his things, so that he might be ready to start for Hampshire early on the following morning; but, in small matters as well as great ones, our movements are guided more by chance than by our own will, and in this case chance decreed that Norman Basset should neither see his lodging at Camden Town on that day, nor his father's house in Hampshire on the morrow.

He was crossing the road by the York Gate when a gentleman on horseback passed him at rather a sharp canter, and at the same moment a little boy, standing on the edge of the pathway, in play opened an umbrella so suddenly that it frightened the horse, which reared back, and threw Norman with violence to the ground. The rider had some trouble to quiet the animal, but, with the assistance of two or three persons who were going by at the time, he at length succeeded so far as to be able to dismount in safety, and leaving the horse to the care of the men who had assembled round him, he busied himself in attending to the injured pedestrian who was lying quite insensible in the road.

"Will some one fetch a cab instantly," said the gentleman—and a boy ran off for that purpose: then turning to one of the bystanders who had proffered

his services, he said, giving his card,—“This is my address; and if you will have the goodness to see this poor young gentleman put into the cab and brought to my house, I will go for a surgeon, for no time must be lost.”

The stranger promised to bring the sufferer himself, on which the equestrian, who was no other than Mr. Ingleby, remounted his horse, and rode off in search of a medical man, and in less than twenty minutes, Norman was stretched on the couch in his dining-room with a surgeon by his side administering such remedies as were likely to restore him to consciousness, while Mr. Ingleby anxiously watched for some indication of returning life. In a few minutes the patient opened his eyes and gazed around him with the bewildered air of one who finds himself in a strange place without knowing how he came there.

“What is the matter?” he inquired in a faint voice, endeavouring to raise his head; “what has happened to me?”

“Nothing that need alarm you,” replied Mr. Ingleby; “keep yourself quiet, and you will do very well.”

“Ah! I remember now—the horse——”

“Yes, it was my unlucky horse that knocked you down; so we must see presently what mischief he has done, and take care of you till it is repaired—that’s all.”

Norman was about to reply, but the surgeon interfered, and told him he must not speak another word, until he had examined his arm, which seemed to be in great pain.

“Here, Mrs. What’s-your-name,” he said to the housekeeper, who was standing at the foot of the couch, “give me a penknife, or a sharp pair of scissors, will you. We must rip up the coat sleeve; there’s a fracture, I’m afraid.”

The sleeve was soon opened, and the coat being taken off, it was discovered the left arm was broken

just below the elbow. The surgeon, who proved to be a very skilful operator, set the bone without giving much pain, adjusted the bandages, and assisted in getting his patient up stairs, and into the bed that had been made ready for him. He then administered a composing draught, recommended that he should be kept very quiet, and promised to call again in the evening to see how he was going on.

"I hope this is not a serious case, doctor," said Mr. Ingleby, as they walked down stairs together.

"Oh, no, not at all; nothing but a simple fracture. Let him keep in bed for two or three days, and it will be all right enough. A good-looking young fellow—do you know who he is?"

"I have not the smallest idea; but I ought to find out as soon as possible, that I may let his friends know of this accident."

"Here is something," said the surgeon, taking up a card-case which was lying on the stairs, "that will probably give us some information."

Mr. Ingleby drew out a card, and, to his infinite surprise, read the words, "Mr. Norman Basset."

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "who could possibly have guessed this? Why, doctor, this young gentleman is the son of a particular friend of mine."

"Indeed! Well, that is singular. You will send to his father directly, of course."

"I shall write to him immediately; but he lives in Hampshire; so the young man must stay with me till he is quite well again, and I shall be obliged if you will give him all the attention in your power."

The surgeon repeated his assurances that there was nothing to be alarmed about, and when he was gone, Mr. Ingleby sat down to ruminate on the strange adventure that had brought Norman Basset so unexpectedly under his roof. From Norman, his thoughts naturally passed to the father and sisters, and, as he mused, a smile from time to time lighted up his countenance, as if some idea unusually pleasant had

crossed his mind; and this fit of thinking continued till it was interrupted by Mrs. Garnet, who came to tell him the invalid was fast asleep. He started from the reverie into which he had unconsciously fallen, and having dismissed the housekeeper with some general directions respecting his guest, he shook his head, and said, mentally, "I'm afraid I'm an old fool after all."

CHAPTER XIX.

It was nearly three weeks before Norman was sufficiently recovered to travel, and during that time he and his kind host had many long and interesting conversations respecting his own affairs and those of his family. Mr. Ingleby had been considering that it would be better for Norman, as far as his worldly interest was concerned, to give up the church altogether as a profession, and enter upon some new career, where he would have the opportunity of advancing his fortune by his talents and industry, which, as regarded his present calling, would avail him nothing without patronage or money—the only passports to church preferment.

There were other honourable paths open to him, Mr. Ingleby said, where these elements were not wanting; and, in fact, it had occurred to that gentleman, that as he had neither son nor partner, his own office would be no bad place for any young man in whose welfare he felt interested. Norman listened to his arguments with attention, and heard his proposal with gratitude; but, in reply to it, said, that he had made his election from principle, not from motives of ambition, and preferred the path he had chosen to any other.

"I should be but an unworthy disciple of our Great Master," he said, with a smile, "if I were to forsake his service because it afforded but little prospect of such worldly advantages as He never enjoyed. Not that I affect to despise the good things of this life, Mr. Ingleby, nor do I pretend to say that I feel no regret at the changes that have taken place ; but they would hardly justify me in throwing off the sacred duties I have solemnly taken upon myself. I have accepted a mission, which conscience tells me I am bound to perform under any circumstances, and I will perform it to the best of my ability."

"You are right, my young friend, and I honour your sentiments. They are worthy of your calling, and I heartily wish I had any influence where it might be of advantage to you, for it is a great pity you should have nothing better in prospect than the curacy of a country village."

"To confess the truth," replied Norman, "I fear I have enough of human weakness and human pride, to prefer a vicarage to a curacy."

"And a bishopric, perhaps, to either?" said Mr. Ingleby, laughing.

"I cannot deny it, sir. I believe it is a very good thing to be a bishop ; but as the higher walks are now barred against me, I will pursue the more humble course that is left open as cheerfully as I can ; and, for anything I know, it may be the happier course after all."

"I see you are a true philosopher, and it is wrong perhaps to desire to change your purpose, therefore I shall say nothing more about it. We must hope that time and opportunity may throw something better in your way than the present aspect of affairs seems to promise."

Norman had advertised in all the leading journals, and he had also written to the master of his college at Oxford, hoping through his interest to obtain the presentation to some small living. From that gentle-

man he had received a kind, but not very encouraging answer, so that his prospect at this moment was anything but cheering; yet his spirit was not cast down, for he possessed, in an eminent degree, that happy capacity for looking on the bright side of every picture, which takes from life half its bitterness, and that firm reliance on a Ruling Power, which teaches men to bear with fortitude their present ills, and look forward with hope to the days to come. At length he was pronounced convalescent, and took his departure from London, accompanied by Mr. Ingleby, who would not hear of his making the journey alone, and was, perhaps, not sorry to have an excuse for so early a repetition of his own visit.

The meeting between Norman and his father was painful, yet consolatory to both. Hitherto they had known very little of each other, but they were now drawn, as it were, closer together; and as Mr. Basset affectionately embraced his son, he said,—

“Norman, you must supply the place to me of him I have lost.”

“Do not doubt it, my father; and if I cannot be all to you that he was, believe me I will at least give you as much comfort as I can, and do my best to lighten the burden you are called upon to bear.”

The presence of Norman had indeed a very salutary effect on the spirits of his father, whose face was at times brightened by a smile, such as it had not worn since his misfortunes; but he spoke very little, and it was often evident that his thoughts were wandering far away from the scenes around him. Mr. Ingleby had only stayed one night, but he had promised Freshfield Ray that he would go down again in two or three weeks, and make a longer visit. Freshfield was now on very familiar terms with the inmates of the Bridge House, so much so, that it was currently reported he was about to marry one of the young ladies; but the world is always better informed on these affairs than the parties concerned; and you

may be quite sure, especially if you live in a country town or village, that your neighbours will know you are going to be married long before you are aware of it yourself. It is quite certain that Mr. Ray had never said a syllable with a view to any such event to either of the ladies in question; nevertheless he appeared to take great pleasure in spending full half of his time in their company, and they found him so extremely agreeable, that he was always a welcome visitor.

One morning, just after breakfast, as Norman was about to betake himself to a little room he called his workshop, where he spent his mornings in writing, Freshfield came in with a letter in his hand, and holding it up far above the reach of any one present, he cried out in a loud voice,—

“Who bids highest for this pretty thing?”

“Who is it for?” said Claudia.

“Ah! that’s the question. Now, Miss Emily, what are you disposed to offer?”

“Nothing at all, Mr. Ray; for I am sure it is not for me.”

“How do you know that?”

“At any rate, sir, I shall make no offer till I ascertain the fact, which I cannot possibly do so long as you keep the letter up there in the clouds; so pray bring it down to earth, that we may see who it really does belong to.”

“Is it for me, Ray?” Norman asked, rather anxiously.

“No, indeed, Mr. Norman, it is not; and I shall keep it up here to give Miss Emily an opportunity of building castles in the air.”

“A style of architecture I have not the least fancy for,” said Emily.

“Have you not? Then I may as well give up my despatches to the proper authority;” and he presented the letter to Claudia, who exclaimed, in a tone of pleasurable surprise,—

“From Florence Gilmour!”

Norman's face was instantly suffused with a deep crimson, but as no one happened to be looking that way at the moment, it passed unnoticed, and he was thus saved from some embarrassment, for, as he had never mentioned his accidental meeting with Florence at Bleachley, his sisters were not aware he had ever seen her. Claudia opened the letter, and having read a few lines said,—

“This is indeed a pleasure—Florence is coming to stay with us next week.”

“Oh! how glad I am,” said Emily; “what does she say?”

“You shall see the letter when I have finished it. Major Gilmour is going to Vienna, and she will stay with us while he is away.”

“Gilmour!” repeated Mr. Ray. “Is not that the young lady Mr. Ingleby thinks so beautiful?”

“Yes, and so she is,” replied Emily; “and just the sort of girl you will like, Norman,” she added, turning towards the place where her brother had been sitting. “Why, I declare he is gone! I wonder he should not feel a little more interested than that.”

“How can you expect him to feel interested about a lady he never saw in his life, my dear?” said Mr. Basset.

“Because it is so natural, papa. Who would believe he could hear that there was a beautiful young lady actually coming to be in the same house with him for two or three weeks, yet walk away to his books as unconcerned as if he had been told there was a kitten or canary-bird expected. Mr. Ray is ten times as much excited I see.”

“True, Miss Emily; I plead guilty to the charge, but you must recollect that it is your brother's business to reprove me for my faults and follies, and not to fall into the like himself.”

“If he attends to his business properly, then, he

will not have much leisure time," said Emily, laughing; "but I am afraid he would only be scattering seed to the winds."

"And I am afraid that is the way such seed is very often wasted," replied Freshfield; "he had better give up preaching and turn his mind to farming."

"Why so, Mr. Ray?" asked Claudia, looking up from her letter.

"Because it is the pleasanter life of the two, Miss Basset. Nay, pray don't look so serious; I meant no disrespect to the clergy, I assure you."

"I hope not," said Claudia, gravely.

"It sounded marvellously like it though," said Emily; "and now I think of it, Mr. Freshfield, I do believe you are rather deficient in that particular; for I remember, last Sunday, I saw you look, I don't know how many times, at that very pretty girl in Lady Thornton's pew."

"And which way might you be looking, Miss Emily, to see it?" said the young farmer with a sly smile.

This repartee made both Claudia and her father laugh, on which Emily ran out of the room, declaring she could not keep the field against three enemies at once.

For a full hour after the unexpected intelligence he had received, Norman sat at his writing-table with a pen in his hand, and a half-finished manuscript spread open before him, but not a single line was added to the work, nor were the meditations of the author such as were likely to bring it to a speedy conclusion. At length he roused himself from this unprofitable reverie.

"To what end," he said, "am I making all these reflections? They will neither alter the past, nor influence the future—I must not lose sight of the facts that Miss Gilmour is a rich heiress, and that I am but a poor curate. It is, perhaps, very fortunate for me, that I have had a glimpse of the danger, since I

shall be all the better prepared to guard against it." And with this sage reflection, he set about finishing his sermon.

It was not till the morning of the day Florence was expected, that he summoned resolution to say that she was not quite a stranger to him; and then he managed to do it in that off-hand manner in which people generally speak of anything they do not wish you to suppose has made any particular impression upon them. It was at the breakfast-table when the conversation naturally turned upon the subject of her anticipated arrival.

"Oh! by the way," he said, in a careless tone, "I think I forgot to tell you I saw Miss Gilmour in Nottinghamshire."

"You did?" said Emily; "and never mentioned it—how very strange!"

"It was only for a few minutes, and then I did not know who she was, or I should have introduced myself."

"And how did you find out who she was?"

"I was told afterwards."

"Where did you see her, Norman?" Claudia asked.

"She was at Bleachley Church one morning when I did duty for the Rector who was ill; and I saw her again at a cottage in the village, but only for a minute or two, and we did not exchange half-a-dozen words."

"But what did you think of her?"

"How could I form any sort of opinion, Emily, upon so slight an acquaintance?"

"You can tell whether you thought her pretty."

"Oh, yes—pretty, certainly—or handsome, I should rather say."

"I wonder if she will remember you."

"I dare say not," answered Norman, rising from the table.

But Emily thought it most probable she would, and that was the reason she said to Florence on her

arrival, "There is somebody here you will be surprised to see." Nor was she disappointed, for it was a great surprise, and evidently an agreeable one ; and if Norman had been unprepared for the meeting he would probably have betrayed more of his feelings than he desired to make known.

CHAPTER XX.

NORMAN had prescribed to himself severe rules for his conduct towards Florence Gilmour, while he should be exposed to the dangerous influence of her presence, for he felt that to indulge even in such familiarity as their relationship might fully have justified, would only be to lay up for himself a store of hopeless desires and unavailing regrets. His behaviour was respectful, friendly, and polite, but nothing more. He scarcely trusted himself to utter even the most common-place compliment, and preserved outwardly so calm a demeanour, that no one could have suspected the painful struggle that was going on within ; yet, in spite of all his reasoning, all his efforts to maintain the mastery over himself, he found that his heart had received a deeper impression than he had been aware of, and that every hour passed in the society of one so eminently qualified to inspire love and admiration, served only to increase his passion, and render it more difficult of concealment. Firm, however, to the resolution he had made, he shut himself up more closely than before amongst his books and papers, alleging as an excuse for this apparent neglect, that it was necessary he should get

forward with the task he had undertaken, while he was yet free from other engagements, which he hoped would not long be the case; and as this seemed reasonable enough, it passed for truth. Still Florence could not help feeling something very like disappointment at the coldness of his manner towards her; so different from what she might have expected from the impassioned looks and tones that had often been recalled to her memory since their interview at Bleachley, and had sometimes, it must be confessed, given rise to certain dreamy speculations as to what might be the consequences should she ever chance to meet with him on more familiar terms. However, she did not suffer the slightest signs of such thoughts and feelings to appear, and even tried to convince herself that she had no more regard for Norman Basset than it was natural and proper to have for her mother's cousin; forgetting that she had never felt it necessary to reason in a similar way with respect to Charles, who stood in exactly the same degree of relationship.

Emily thought she observed something peculiar in the manners of both that did not wear quite the stamp of indifference, but she was discreet enough to say nothing about it. She had lately, for reasons best known to herself, exhibited an ardent desire to become an expert housekeeper, and had, in a wonderfully short space of time, attained to a greater degree of proficiency in that laudable branch of art than might have been expected from her previous inexperience; but whether it was that Freshfield Ray declared the cakes she made were the best he ever tasted in his life, praised the industry that manufactured chair-covers or curtains, and admired the taste that decorated the very plainly-furnished apartments with many little ornamental works, it would be difficult to say; although it may fairly be surmised that such praises might have their influence.

A few days after the arrival of Florence Gilmour,

Emily had just placed on the table a wire-basket, the work of her own hands, filled with moss and fresh flowers, when Mr. Ray came into the room.

"Ah!" he said, taking it up in his hand, "I have no one to make such pretty things for me."

"And if you had," she replied, laughing, "I do not think you would value them in the least; for I verily believe you would rather any one would make you a canvas-bag for your seeds, than the most beautiful flower-basket in the world."

"Indeed, you do me great injustice, Miss Emily. I cannot pretend to much refinement, I know, but I am not so utterly devoid of taste as you seem to imagine."

"Nay, I am quite willing to give you credit for any amount of taste you think proper to claim; and, apropos of that, what do you think of Florence?"

"I think she is an angel!" he answered, with so much animation, that Emily looked at him with unfeigned surprise; when, blushing at his own warmth, he added, rather confusedly, "You must allow she is very good-looking."

"Bless me! Mr. Ray, I never thought of denying it, I am sure; but it is rather a falling off from your first observation, to descend to such a very tame compliment. I should think, sir, an angel might have pretensions to be called something beyond good-looking."

"I ought to have said beautiful—is that it?"

"Certainly, if you think so."

"No, I do not think Miss Gilmour beautiful, but I think her very charming."

Emily made no reply, but occupied herself in arranging her flowers, and her father coming in at the moment, nothing more was said on the subject. The everyday life at Bridge House offered but little variety, yet Florence found herself very happy there, much happier, indeed, than at her own luxurious home.

“How little,” she one day said to Claudia, “how very little the style of one’s living has to do with real happiness! I could be very well contented to spend my whole life here, Claudia, provided I might always choose my companions.”

“I believe, indeed, Florence, that the style in which people live has but little to do, in reality, with their happiness; but there is more in it than that—we are estimated by the appearance we make in the world, and treated accordingly.”

“You mean to say that, if we cannot live in a certain style, we may possibly be slighted by people we care nothing at all about? Now that would never cause me the slightest uneasiness or regret.”

“You have never been tried, dear, and I sincerely hope you never will.”

“And in your own trial, Claudia, what is it you have lost that is worth lamenting?”

“Nothing personal to myself. I could be quite happy in the life I lead here as far as I alone am concerned, for a woman may always find her happiness in trifles and in seclusion; but it is not so with a man; and when I see my father broken down as he is with care, and think of my brothers, the one lost to us perhaps for ever, and the other with a hard life of poverty before him, do you wonder that I should sometimes feel melancholy?”

“No, I do not. But these evils do not all arise from loss of fortune; for, if Charles were here, your father would not be unhappy; and if he should return, which let us all hope he will, he could take to farming, and that must be a happy life enough, to judge from Mr. Ray.”

“Mr. Ray is not a poor man, Florence.”

“True—but if he were, he would certainly laugh at his own poverty, and we should not like him a bit the less.”

“He would laugh, perhaps, because it is his

nature to be gay, and his mode of life has not taught him to set much value on the consideration of the world; but Norman is different both by nature and education, and notwithstanding all his fortitude, he must feel his altered position very severely, and will feel it more by-and-bye than he does now."

"But, do you suppose, Claudia, that your brother, with his high talents, and all his noble qualities, can fail to make his own fortune?"

"I am afraid, dear Florence, there are many high-minded and highly-gifted men of his profession, who are fated to pass their whole lives in poverty and obscurity. There is no scarcity of humble merit in the church."

"Then I wish I had the ruling of the world for a little while—I fancy I should displace a few of the dignitaries, and set up some of the humble merit in their room."

"And where would you place Norman?"

"Oh! I don't exactly know. Something might depend on his own views and sentiments. Perhaps he would not choose to be beholden to me for his elevation."

The moment these words had escaped her she was sorry she had uttered them, and said, hurriedly, as if to cover the meaning she was conscious they contained,—

"I mean if I were prime minister, you know."

Claudia made no answer, but thought within herself,—

"Dear generous Florence—Norman will never take advantage of your noble spirit, I am very sure."

On the day after this conversation, Mr. Ingleby came down to the Hill Farm. He had heard of a vacant curacy at Andover through the brother of the rector, with whom he happened to be acquainted, and having spoken very highly in favour of Norman Basset, his friend had written to his brother, and received a reply that caused Mr. Ingleby to lose no

time in seeing Norman about it, and, perhaps, he was not sorry to have so good a pretext for paying another visit to Bridge House so soon. He would have been a welcome visitor under any circumstances, but was doubly so now, for Norman was growing rather dispirited at the non-success of his efforts to obtain some appointment, and was truly rejoiced at the prospect of being settled so near his family. Now Mr. Ingleby had discovered in his conversation with the brother of Mr. Robertson, the incumbent of the new church, as it was still called, although it had been erected nearly forty years, that the said incumbent was a very worthy kind of man, and was rather fond of doing a service for any one if it did not give him much trouble, that being a thing he was not fond of. In selecting a new curate in place of the last who was lately dead, his great object was to get one able and willing to perform all the heaviest part of the duty, so as to leave as little as possible for the superior to do; but he was also desirous that his substitute should be a man of unexceptionable character and high talent, partly with a view to the welfare of his parishioners, and partly that no dissatisfaction might arise among them on the score of his own indolence. Thus far Norman was exactly the man to suit him; but as there were several applicants, Mr. Ingleby thought it would be wiser to have a personal interview with Mr. Robertson than to trust to the chances of a written correspondence, and he, therefore, proposed riding over to the rectory himself, an offer Norman gratefully accepted. The ride, on horseback, occupied about an hour and a half, and when Mr. Ingleby alighted at the gate of the rector's abode he perceived the reverend gentleman sauntering about his garden with his hands behind him, in the full enjoyment of perfect leisure. In appearance he was the very personification of easy good nature, and welcomed his stranger guest as heartily as if he had been an old acquaintance.

“So, I suppose you are come about the young fellow my brother speaks so highly of,” he said. “Well, I don’t know what to say about it, for there’s the Earl of Summerton has just written to me in behalf of a relative of his own; and we like to oblige these sort of people if we can; however, we will go in and talk the matter over.”

He led the way into the house, which presented all the appearance of a domicile wherein the comfort of the inhabitants was especially studied and provided for. The carpets were soft to tread upon, the chairs looked comfortable, the couches looked comfortable, and the stately old lady who was hemming muslin, with an elegant work-basket before her, looked comfortable. This lady turned out to be Mrs. Robertson, and although she was full ten years older than her husband, they had journeyed on through life together in the easiest manner possible, the way being as smooth and pleasant as a well-rolled gravelled path running between beds of flowers. They never had any children, and being thus spared most of the troubles and anxieties of married life, they had fallen into a habit of living almost entirely for themselves. Even their good qualities, of which they had many, were such as contributed to their own enjoyment. They were hospitable because they liked society; they were liberal because they had ample means of being so without privation to themselves, and they liked the applause that liberality calls forth; and they were good-natured, perhaps from the very absence of those cares and vexations that are apt to make people otherwise.

Mr. Robertson having introduced his guest, and mentioned the business on which he came, said to his lady,—“Now, my dear, we will have some luncheon if you please, and discuss this affair over a glass of Madeira, or of home-brewed if Mr. Ingleby prefers it.”

The lady folded up her work and rang the bell, a

signal that appeared to be very well understood by the domestics, as a man-servant appeared in a few minutes and spread a cloth on the table, which was speedily covered with materials for a substantial repast.

"We never dine till six, Mr. Ingleby," said the lady, "so we generally make a good luncheon."

Mr. Ingleby acquiesced in the propriety of this arrangement, but he could not help wishing the meal had been a less weighty affair, for it occupied the worthy divine so completely during the greater part of an hour, that he seemed unable to fix his thoughts on anything else, and in answer to some question relative to the curacy, he said, "We will talk of that by-and-bye—try a glass of this sherry, and let me help you to the other wing of this chicken." At length he took the napkin from under his chin, wiped his mouth and hands, pushed back his chair, and came to the point at once, thus—"Well—now about this young man—let me hear what you know of him."

Mr. Ingleby entered into a detailed account of the circumstances in which Norman had been placed by his father's unfortunate failure, and spoke in the warmest terms of his high attainments, his fitness for the duties of his vocation, his excellent disposition and gentlemanlike manners.

Mr. Robertson hesitated for awhile, but at length he said that he would see the young gentleman on the following day, and if he found that his opinions and principles were such as he approved of, would run the risk of disobliging the Earl of Summerton (which was, in fact, of no sort of consequence to him), and give the appointment to Mr. Norman Basset, with a salary of one hundred and fifty pounds a year.

Mr. Ingleby rode back in high spirits, delighted with the success of his mission, and about a mile from the farm encountered Norman, who, in his anxiety to know the result, had gone out to meet him. He immediately dismounted, and, as they walked

back together, he related all that had passed, giving a somewhat humorous description of the "jolly parson," as he called him; nor was Norman at all displeased at hearing his future superior so designated.

This event was the cause of much rejoicing at Bridge House, but doubly so on this occasion, as every one of the family was as truly grateful to Mr. Ingleby as Norman himself for the very essential benefit he had now rendered.

"You always bring happiness with you, Mr. Ingleby," said Claudia, extending her hand to him with a smile of gratitude; and as he took it between both his, he replied,—

"Do I, Miss Basset? Perhaps I shall want to take it away with me some of these days."

On the following morning Norman rode over to the parsonage, and had a long interview with Mr. Robertson, which terminated to their mutual satisfaction; the worthy rector being extremely pleased with the easy manners and gentlemanly appearance of his new curate, who was no less contented with the kind reception he had met with, and the friendliness he saw reason to hope for in their future intercourse with each other. Mrs. Robertson undertook to engage apartments for him in the town, and it was settled that he should take possession of them on the following Saturday, that he might be ready to do duty on the Sunday morning.

CHAPTER XXI.

It was the last evening that Norman was to spend at Bridge House, and he had faithfully adhered to his resolution of maintaining the same calm unimpassioned manner towards Florence that was construed by her into coldness and indifference. Not a single word had escaped him that could give her the least insight into the true state of his feelings; but, perhaps, if he had known with what pleasure such a word would have been listened to, he would not have been able to resist the temptation of speaking it. The day had been remarkably fine, and the sun was setting with more than usual splendour. Norman, who particularly delighted in a fine sunset, had walked out to enjoy the brilliant spectacle, and meeting with his sisters and Florence, attended by Mr. Ray, he joined them. It was the first time he had done so since Florence had been there; it was the first time he had ever offered her his arm, and as she took it he fancied he felt a slight tremor, but it might be only fancy—he would not indulge the thought. Emily and Claudia were walking together, and Freshfield was strolling by their side, when their attention was arrested by an enormous dragon fly of extraordinary beauty, and they stood still for awhile to watch it,

with its shining wings reflecting the bright hues of the setting sun.

Thus Norman and Florence were some way in advance, and a sudden turn of the road taking them out of sight of their companions, it appeared as if they were walking alone. They were only conversing on common-place subjects, yet Norman felt an irresistible impulse to bend his head down to hers, and press her arm more closely within his own than was absolutely necessary; and, as she could not help being conscious of these movements, her eyes were cast down and her face was overspread with blushes, so that on the whole, they looked very like a pair of lovers, and would certainly have been taken for such by any casual passer-by. At this precise moment, when appearances were so much against them, a horseman came galloping along the road, and as he drew near, Florence was surprised and annoyed to perceive that it was Captain Romer, nor did she attempt to conceal her vexation at the discovery. The Captain was equally surprised and not less displeased at the sight of her companion, whom he recognised at once as the young curate he had seen in Nottinghamshire. It certainly was him—there was no mistake about that—yet how could he possibly have contrived to place himself on such familiar terms with her in so short a time?

“Confound his impudence!” was the mental ejaculation of the enraged son of Mars, as he leaped from his horse, and approached the young lady with a smile, not a very benignant one, on his lip, and a scowl on his brow. “How do you do, Miss Gilmour? I was going to do myself the pleasure of calling on you with a letter from your father which arrived yesterday.”

“I thank you, Captain Romer—it might have been forwarded by post; however, I am glad to save you the trouble of coming any further.”

He bit his lip, and coloured with anger, but said in

as soft a tone as he could command, as he gave her the letter—"Nevertheless I shall, with your permission, have the happiness of paying you a visit before I return to town—I have seen this gentleman before, I think; Norman bowed slightly, and Florence said—"My cousin—Mr. Norman Basset."

The utter astonishment and dismay with which this announcement was received caused a smile on Norman's face which did not escape the jealous eyes of his rival, who would have felt great satisfaction in knocking him down, but as there was no ostensible ground for so violent a proceeding he was compelled to restrain the impulse.

Little more passed, but as he remounted his horse he said,—

"I am remaining for two or three days at an inn in Basingstoke, and shall ride over to Bridge House to-morrow morning."

He then bowed and rode away, and at that instant the rest of the party came in sight.

"Miss Gilmour," said Norman, earnestly, "if this visit is very disagreeable to you I will take care to prevent it, if you give me authority so to do."

"It is disagreeable to me, Mr. Norman; but Captain Romer is well aware that I must receive it, if he chooses to force it upon me."

"Then, perhaps, it would be improper for me to interfere; yet that you should be subjected to an insult that I could save you from, it is scarcely to be borne!"

Startled by the passionate vehemence of his tone, Florence raised her eyes suddenly to his face, and it was then a suspicion first darted across her mind that he loved her.

Fearing he had betrayed too much, Norman made a strong effort to regain his usual composure, but he was absent and thoughtful during the remainder of the walk, nor was he able to rally his spirits throughout the whole evening.

The major's letter contained nothing very particular, except an intimation that he should probably be absent about three weeks longer, as he meant to spend some time in Paris on his way back.

Norman passed a restless night. He had seen something in Florence's manner that justified him in supposing she was not quite indifferent to him, but he felt it would be wrong to endeavour to take the slightest advantage of this supposition, for he was no stranger to the violent measures threatened by Major Gilmour if Florence should marry against his will; and he also knew in what light his own family was now considered by that haughty, cold-hearted man.

"The temptation is great," he said to himself; "but I must not give way to it; the tie between parent and child is far too sacred to be trifled with, and I will not give her cause to reproach me hereafter. Then why think of her at all? It is a dream that never can be realised, and, as such, the wisest thing I can do is to banish it from my mind at once and for ever."

But this is in general more easily said than done. It is not always within the limits of our own power to banish a favourite object from our thoughts at a minute's notice—it will not go; but, like an obstinate tenant, continues to hold possession of the premises long after it has received notice to quit. Norman, however, partially succeeded for the time being, but then he had to think of the sermons he was writing, and of the new congregation that was to sit in judgment upon him on the following Sunday. He had also to speculate upon how he should get on with his new rector; whether they would agree in opinions, and whether he should like his society. All these were interesting subjects for reflection, and certainly did their part towards banishing that still more interesting one which, as far as men are concerned, it is a great mistake to suppose is all-engrossing. God knows what would become of the world if it were.

Norman had not much preparation to make for his departure. A couple of portmanteaus, and a box filled with books and papers, constituted nearly the whole of his luggage; but as this had to be conveyed to his destination, Mr. Ray had offered to drive him over to Andover in his gig, and accordingly about eleven o'clock they set off together. He had parted from Florence without a word, or even a look, indicative of more than ordinary feeling; and she began to doubt whether the emotion he had betrayed on the preceding evening was any more than he would have shown had a similar annoyance been offered to one of his sisters.

Captain Romer called as he had said he should, and was much disappointed at having no opportunity of seeing Florence alone, for she had particularly requested that everybody would remain in the room while he was there; and as he could not but perceive she had no intention of granting him a particular audience he very soon took his leave without having made the slightest allusion to the meeting of the preceding day. He had been treated with the most scrupulous politeness, but no one had invited him either to prolong his visit, or to repeat it, and he was excessively mortified, for he felt that the slight was premeditated, and that he, with all his advantages of fashionable notoriety and prospective rank and fortune, was outrivalled by an obscure country curate, the penniless son of a ruined father.

Burning with resentment and jealousy he resolved to take the most effectual means of crushing the presumptuous hopes, as he imagined, of Norman Basset by writing to Major Gilmour; therefore, the moment he reached his inn he called for pen and ink, and vented a portion of his indignation in a long epistle, in which, after speaking with affected contempt of his cold reception at Bridge House, he thus proceeded,—

“This behaviour would have struck me as something extraordinary certainly if I had not been in possession of a clue to it in a discovery I had accidentally made on the preceding evening. You may probably remember a young man who preached at Bleachley Church when you were at Brianscourt in the spring, and of whom Miss Gilmour then spoke with a vast deal of admiration. I am not aware whether she knew at that time who he was, but no doubt you will be as much surprised as I was to learn that he turns out to be the younger son of Mr. Basset, and is now staying in the same house with her. I happened to meet them yesterday evening walking *alone* together, when Miss Gilmour introduced him as her cousin, Mr. Norman Basset; and this, I suppose, may account for the uncivil behaviour of the whole family, whose interest it evidently is to promote the good understanding that appears to subsist between the young lady and this obscure individual, whom she honours with marks of regard I should esteem myself but too happy to obtain, and have often solicited in vain.”

This letter did not fail to produce the intended effect of alarming the pride of the major, and impelling him to take some decisive steps for putting an end to such dangerous intercourse. Instead of going to Paris he returned to town as speedily as possible, and immediately sent a summons to Florence, couched in the most peremptory terms, requiring her immediate presence in town, without assigning any reason, but giving her to understand that he would brook neither excuse nor delay.

Florence was, indeed, at no loss to guess the true cause of this unwelcome mandate, which she felt very strongly tempted to disobey, but her natural good sense overcame the temptation, powerful as it was; for she reflected that any unwise opposition to his will in cases where he had a right to command

obedience would afford him a plea to attribute her non-compliance with it in questions of greater importance to the absence of a proper sense of duty.

To the Bassets she merely said that her father had returned from his journey sooner than he expected, and could not manage without her at home; and to save them from feeling what she could not but know was a premeditated insult, she delivered to Mr. Basset a complimentary message which the letter did not contain: and it must surely be a very rigid moralist, indeed, who would find fault with so innocent a deception.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAJOR GILMOUR received his daughter on her return with that frigid air of politeness, which, with him, always denoted extreme displeasure, and which, as everybody knows, is far more disagreeable and harder to bear than any violent demonstration of anger, inasmuch as it admits neither of defence nor reply. He made a few cold common-place inquiries respecting the health and present situation of his former friend, but his tone and manner showed how little interest he felt in the subject. Two or three days had passed, and not a word had been said about Captain Romer, nor had that gentleman made his appearance in Belgrave Square, so that Florence began to flatter herself that her father had given up the idea of the alliance ; but this hope had no solid foundation, and soon fell to the ground, for, on the morning of the fourth day, as she was leaving the breakfast-room, the major said,—

“ Miss Gilmour, I wish to have a few minutes’ conversation with you.”

She shut the door again and reseated herself, oppressed by that sickening of the heart with which we listen for tidings we know to be of evil import. There was a short interval of silence, which was broken by the major.

"It is necessary," he said, "that I should now have a definitive answer with regard to the proposal of Lord Merrington's nephew, who must be trifled with no longer."

"I am not aware that he has been trifled with at all, sir," replied Florence. "Captain Romer is perfectly well acquainted with my sentiments on that subject; and his extraordinary and most ungentlemanly perseverance, after my very explicit refusal of his offer, can have no other effect than to excite my surprise and indignation."

"All this may be very like a heroine," replied her father, coldly; "but it is very unlike a young woman of rational and proper ideas. In short, Florence, I expect there will be no more frivolous objections raised to an alliance that is in every way suitable, and will at once place you in the position to which you are entitled both by birth and fortune."

"I did hope, sir, that I should have been spared any further importunity on a subject so distressing to me—my opinion of Captain Romer is not altered—it never can alter; he is to me not only an object of indifference, but of dislike; and I would infinitely rather die than pass my life with such a man."

"As to dying," said the major, contemptuously, "that is mere idle talk, since you have no control over the term of your own existence; and I do not imagine your romance will go so far as to break your heart, or induce you to take a draught of hemlock—the day is gone by for that sort of thing."

"But the day is not gone by," said Florence, with a degree of spirit that somewhat startled her father, "when a woman may form her own estimate of right and wrong, and act according to it. I feel that it would be sacrilege to promise in the sight of Heaven to honour and obey a man I detest and despise. It would be a mockery of God's holy ordinance, and I will not do it."

"Upon my word, you seem to have profited by the

lessons of your clerical friend. Pray was this the sort of cant he entertained you with in your evening walks?"

"I never walked with the gentleman you allude to but once, and on that occasion I was met by Captain Romer, who, I presume, mentioned the circumstance to you."

"And may I ask, Miss Gilmour, whether you knew who this young man was when you heard him preach at Bleachley?"

"Surely, sir, you must know that I did not," replied Florence, with indignant surprise.

"Then, when did you first become aware that he was one of the Bassets?"

"Not till I saw him at their house in Hampshire. But if you imagine, sir, that my conduct is in any way influenced by Mr. Norman Basset, permit me to remind you that I had expressed my sentiments with regard to Captain Romer before I had even seen Mr. Basset as a stranger."

"I remember you had made some objections to him that might have been overcome, if these needy people had not had the art to turn your folly to their own advantage. If I had known anything about this second son I certainly should never have consented to your going there."

"Your suspicions are so unjust," said Florence, bursting into tears, "that I do not know how to reply to them. They are unjust to me, and insulting to a most honourable and estimable family."

"You are amazingly eloquent in their defence; but it is quite possible that what you consider honourable and estimable, I may look upon in a very different light."

"Sir, I do not, I cannot understand you. They require no defence, for they have done nothing to call forth any charge against them; and I am quite convinced that not one of the family harbours the most remote idea of such a design as your suspicions

seem to point at; and least of all, Norman himself, whose attentions to me have not, in one single instance, passed the bounds of common civility."

"So far, then, he has acted wisely," said the major, with a sneer in his voice and look, "and to ensure a continuance of such prudent forbearance, I desire that, henceforth, you hold no communication whatever with those people either by writing or visiting. Let the connection cease altogether."

Florence was silent.

"You do not answer. Do you mean to dispute my commands?"

"No, sir; I do not. However painful it may be to obey you, I am prepared to do so on every point but one."

"I will admit of no exceptions,—you must either accede to all my views and wishes, or cease to be considered as my daughter; and if you flatter yourself that this is a mere empty threat, you are mistaken, for probably, Miss Gilmour, you are not aware that I have another daughter."

He had risen from his seat, and for the last few minutes had been pacing the room up and down, but he now stopped short, and fixed his eyes sternly upon her to observe what effect was produced by this startling and most unexpected revelation.

"Another daughter!" she repeated in a faltering voice, turning very pale.

"Yes, another daughter, whose claims I am ready to acknowledge if you think proper to forfeit the advantages usually considered to belong to legitimate birth. You now know what your real position is,—I leave you to reflect upon it, and shall expect your final answer to-morrow morning."

"You can have it now, sir; for it will not be affected even by this cruel disclosure; and——"

"I will not take it now," he replied, interrupting her with ill-suppressed fury in his tone and look,—
"You had better consider well; for when you have

determined your course, I shall resolve on mine, and it will then be too late to repent."

He left the room, and Florence did indeed begin to consider the serious situation in which she was now placed. Hitherto, she had looked upon herself, and been regarded by the world, as the sole heiress of her father's wealth. She had believed herself to be his only child, and, whatever differences might arise between them, had never contemplated the possibility of being utterly discarded, or dreamed of the existence of so formidable a rival. But why had she never heard of this daughter before? She was probably the offspring of an Indian mother, and in that case might be grown up to womanhood; but it was also possible that she was of European birth, and still a child. How, and where was she living? Was she under the protection of her father, and cared for by him? Perhaps he had more affection for this unacknowledged child than for herself, and had she not in reality an equal claim to the love and care of her parent?

All these and many other thoughts crowded upon the mind of the unhappy girl; and, as she pressed her hands on her throbbing temples, bitter tears forced their way through the white transparent fingers. It is an easy thing, whilst we are in the full enjoyment of prosperity, when no visible clouds hang over us, and all life's blessings appear within our reach, it is then indeed easy to say, "All this I could cheerfully resign were it needful to make the sacrifice." But let the hour of trial come, and how few would be found with sufficient moral courage to meet it without shrinking! If Florence had, by any unforeseen calamity over which she had no control, suddenly found herself reduced to poverty, she would have shown no want of fortitude in submitting to the blow; but here she was called upon to give up her birthright to a stranger by her own voluntary act, and this was not an easy task. If her father should discard her

entirely, she had no resource beyond a trifling legacy of one thousand pounds, which, by her uncle's will, she was to receive on coming of age; but this was a very small pittance for one who had been accustomed from her earliest infancy to all the luxuries and indulgences that money could procure, and she doubted her own power to bear patiently the privations of so scanty an inheritance. Yet the alternative was now more hateful to her than ever, and after a long and painful struggle with a variety of contending feelings, she resolved to remain firm to her purpose of rejecting the proposed alliance, and do the best she could under whatever circumstances might arise from her decision. Having made up her mind to adopt this course, she became more tranquil, and hoped to be able to meet her father at dinner with tolerable composure. It was a relief to her, however, that he did not dine at home, nor did she see him again that day; but the morning came, and with it, the necessity of giving the required answer. She apprehended a violent scene, but such apprehensions were groundless, for the major heard her reply without deigning to utter a single word, or betray any signs of emotion beyond what might be gathered from his compressed lips and darkened brow. At length he rose abruptly and quitted the room, leaving his daughter to form vague conjectures as to what might be the result of her adherence to the resolution she had taken; but on this point she was fated to remain for some time in uncertainty, for her father shut himself up the whole morning in his dressing-room, and about the middle of the day went out, leaving word he should not return to dinner. In the evening she received a note from his solicitor, saying that he was gone out of town; and she then found, on inquiry, that he had taken his own man with him, and two travelling trunks, with other luggage.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON the very day that Florence Gilmour had spoken her final determination to reject the suit of Captain Romer, that gentleman received a letter from Lord Merrington's steward, containing the important information that his uncle was so dangerously ill, that the physician was of opinion he could not live many days; and this intelligence was coupled with a request, that Captain Romer would lose no time in coming down to Brianscourt, as his lordship had expressed a desire to see him, and it was moreover highly desirable that the heir should be upon the spot. The captain, unfortunately for himself, was not alone when this letter was put into his hand, and in the surprise it occasioned he was so indiscreet as to exhibit evident signs of satisfaction that did not escape the observation of his companions, one of whom, a Mr. Grantley, was the person whom, on a former occasion, Romer had accused of unfair play, an accusation which, being not altogether unfounded, he had never forgiven.

"You are a lucky fellow, Romer," said one.

"Yes, rather," he replied, putting the letter coolly into his pocket. "I shall not go down for a day or

two, though ; there will be all the feminines belonging to the family in the house with horrid dismal faces, and I should be obliged to look melancholy too, which would be a deuced bore."

This called forth a laugh, in which he most indecorously joined, and even acceded to a proposal that they should all dine together at the club. The news of Lord Merrington's approaching death was interesting to most of Romer's friends, as there were few of them to whom he was not indebted to some amount, consequently the dinner-party that day was not composed of mourners, nor did the heir himself pretend to even a decent degree of sorrow. Yet the old lord was his nearest relative, and had always shown more regard for him than he had ever manifested towards any other human being. The wine was circulated pretty freely, and the spirits of the company were thereby considerably elated ; so much so that at length one of the party rose, and proposed the health of Frederick, Lord Merrington, to which Romer unscrupulously responded. As he became more and more elated, he spoke very unguardedly about the state of his affairs ; made a jest of having squandered away his patrimony, drew caricatures of Messieurs Lloyd and Dobson, and finally made known that his matrimonial scheme was at an end, declaring that, under the present circumstances, he looked upon it as a precious lucky escape. Now all this information was entirely new to his auditors, who certainly would not have been enlightened on any one of the points mentioned, but for the coming event which had given quite an altered aspect to them ; still it is never wise to be premature in making such disclosures ; and perhaps if Captain Romer had not been so greatly exhilarated by the united effects of wine and welcome news, he would have been more prudent. On the following morning another letter came, urging the necessity of his immediate presence at Brianscourt, and to this he replied that he was unavoidably

detained, but would certainly come down the next day; yet the next day passed and the day after that, and he was still in town. In fact he had made up his mind to delay his journey till all was over, and thus avoid witnessing a death-bed scene, as he expressed it, and of which he did not scruple to avow he had the utmost horror.

Foolish young man. Did he believe himself to be immortal? Four days had gone by, and on the fifth morning he was anxiously waiting for the coming in of the post which was later than usual. At last he heard the loud quick "rat tat," that makes so many hearts throb with expectation every day and every hour; for if there is one occurrence of daily life that never fails to awaken all the varied emotions that can agitate the human breast, that is the ever-exciting cause of hope and fear, joy and sorrow, surprise, disappointment, and despair, surely it is the "postman's knock." In the present instance it did not prove to be the harbinger of either hope or gladness: he looked for the black seal in vain, and on tearing open the missive with eager haste he read, to his great dismay, the following concise note:—

"SIR,

"My lord is so much better as to be considered quite out of danger. His lordship desires me to say, you need not trouble yourself to come to Brians-court.

I am, sir

"Your obedient servant,

"PETER GIBSON."

The utter discomfiture of Captain Romer at this unexpected turn of his affairs was almost ludicrous. He had contemplated the demise of his uncle as such a matter of certainty that it had never once occurred to him to reflect that while there is life, there is also

a chance of recovery; but the conviction of this truth now forced itself most unpleasantly upon his mind, and he gave vent to his dissatisfaction in such expressions as these,—

“What a cursed bore! Just when I thought I was all right—and now things are as bad as ever again. I have let those fellows know, too, how far I am in with Lloyd and Dobson, and that it’s all off with the Gilmours too. I was a fool to do that; but who the deuce would have supposed the old gentleman was going to baulk me in this manner?”

He then began to consider what he had better do with regard to Lord Merrington’s angry message, for it was not at all likely he would easily forget the neglect with which he had been treated, and Romer now wished he had gone down at first; but, as the omission was irremediable, all he could do was to soften down as much as possible the fact of his inattention, and with that view he started off without delay for Brianscourt.

What first struck him on his arrival was the altered tone of the domestics towards himself. He had never been very popular among them, his manners being insufferably haughty and assuming, yet none of them had ever ventured to show him any sort of disrespect, for he was looked upon as the future lord of the domain, and treated accordingly. He was therefore rather surprised at the careless air with which the man who opened the hall-door to him answered his inquiries.

“How is my uncle, Jennings?”

“My lord is a great deal better, Captain Romer, but he does not see any visitors.”

“I suppose not. Let him know that I am here, will you?”

The man coughed in a dubious manner, and with a half smile said,—

“Perhaps you had better step into the library, sir, and I will send Mr. Gibson to you.”

"Oh,—very well—send Gibson by all means, I can explain to him why I did not come before."

Another short dry cough was the only answer Mr. Jennings condescended to make, and Captain Romer walked with his usual assumption of importance through the hall to the library, where a servant-girl was cleaning the grate. She turned her head and stared at him for a moment, then, instead of rising and quitting the room with a respectful curtsy, she continued her occupation in a most vigorous and irreverent manner. Romer threw himself on a sofa, and took up a book, but he was in no mood for reading, and after waiting nearly a quarter of an hour, he was about to ring the bell, when Mr. Gibson made his appearance, and the girl instantly gathered up her brushes and vanished like lightning.

"Well, Gibson," said Romer, "I am very glad to hear my uncle is so much better; it was extremely unfortunate that I was not able to come down before; he will think it neglectful, I dare say, but the fact is, I could not help it, and I really did not myself apprehend any danger."

"I think, Captain Romer," replied Gibson, who was a grave, respectable, middle-aged man, "I told you, in my first letter, that his lordship was considered to be in very great danger."

"I forget the exact terms, but it did not make that impression on me, and I had to attend a trial about a debt owing me; I came down the moment I was free."

"It is a pity you did not come sooner, sir; for, to tell you the truth, I am afraid that excuse will not do with my lord."

"Well, then, I cannot help it, if he is offended why so it must be; but I should like him to know that I am here now, at any rate."

"I will let him know, if you wish it; but I do not think he will see you."

"I must stay till he will, then. Does he sit up at all?"

"Oh, yes; he has done so for two or three days, and I believe he is up now."

"Then I have a great mind to go to him and make my peace."

"You had better not, I assure you, Captain Romer; if you like to send any message, I will take it, but it would be very wrong to force yourself into my lord's presence, and would do you no good whatever."

"I will write a note, then,—give me a pen and ink."

The steward supplied him with the requisite materials, and waited while he wrote a few lines, expressing his sorrow at having been so long detained in town, the happiness he felt at his uncle's amended state, and a request to be admitted to his presence.

This was carried up by Gibson, who soon returned with a slip of paper in his hand, unfolded and unsealed, on which were traced, in Lord Merrington's own handwriting, and under evident excitement, these words: "Sir,—I will never see you again; and the sooner you leave my house the better I shall be pleased.—MERRINGTON."

The emissary presented this unfriendly scroll without saying a single word, and as Romer glanced his eyes over it, the colour mounted to his forehead; however, he swallowed the mortification as well as he could, and affected to turn it off with a laugh.

"I see, I am in a pretty scrape," he said, "but the storm will blow over in a day or two; and, in the meantime, I shall stop at the inn, so, when Lord Merrington wants to see me, Gibson, you can let me know."

"When he does, I certainly will, sir," replied Gibson, in a dry tone, and with a peculiar expression of countenance that the captain did not exactly like; but, as there was nothing to be done, he walked off to the inn excessively out of humour, and vented his

spleen upon the landlord, who gave a shrewd guess that all was not right at the great house, and set some of his satellites to find out what was the matter, by availing themselves of the existing relations between them and the servants at Brianscourt.

Captain Romer was especially incensed against his uncle's domestics, whom he stigmatized as a set of insolent rascals, vowing, in his own mind, that he would teach them better manners as soon as all came right again, for, that all would come right, he seemed to consider a matter of course; but he had not the real clue to Lord Merrington's present state of mind, or, perhaps, he would not have reckoned with such certainty on the return of his favour.

Mention has already been made of an individual named Grantley, who had reasons of his own for harbouring sentiments by no means friendly towards Captain Romer, and, as he was one of those who dined with Romer at the club on the day the first news arrived of Lord Merrington's illness, he was in possession of a few facts that gave him the power of gratifying his ill-will by using his knowledge to the injury of the presumptive heir. He heard that Lord Merrington was better, was out of danger, and he bethought himself that it would be a capital way of revenging himself on Romer to let the old gentleman know how he had deported himself on the day in question, and also to give him an insight into the true state of the Captain's finances, which Romer had been unwise enough to say his uncle was entirely unacquainted with.

Acting on this bright idea, he put in requisition all his literary talents to produce a startling and effective composition in the form of an epistle, giving an exaggerated account of the hilarity of the dinner-party in general, and of Captain Romer in particular, on the day in question; not forgetting to speak of his having been then and there dubbed "Lord Mer-

rington," and hinting, in rather broad terms, that he had evinced no disinclination to come into possession of that title forthwith. To this obliging communication he added the circumstance of Captain Romer's having mortgaged his estate to Messrs. Lloyd and Dobson, and that, in less than a twelvemonth, unless Lord Merrington should be kind enough to leave him his shoes, he would be in the unpleasant position of a beggar, as he had been decidedly rejected by the lady whose fortune he had reckoned upon somewhat too confidently. Mr. Grantley refrained, for several reasons, from subscribing his name to this important document, which, nevertheless, had all the effect intended, and something more.

If Lord Merrington had possessed the power of cutting off the entail, he certainly would have done so, but there was another mode of action which was in his power, and might answer the purpose of disinheriting his nephew quite as well, and that was, to marry. His reluctance to the holy estate of matrimony had considerably diminished since his illness, owing to the circumstance of his having been nursed and tended by a certain damsel with cherry cheeks and bright black eyes, called Betsey, or, in more polite language, Elizabeth Fowler, the daughter of one of his tenants, a merry, kind-hearted, comely lass, to whose care and unremitting attention he was chiefly indebted for his recovery. His sister and two cousins had stayed in the house while he was considered in immediate danger, and, to do them justice, they had shed abundance of tears, and made great lamentations; but they were nervous ladies, utterly incapable of rendering such assistance to the sick man as his situation required, so that, in spite of their grief, he would probably have died, had not the said Elizabeth, less sensitive, but more useful, stationed herself at his bedside for two days and two nights, when any moment might have put an end to

his worldly career, if there had been no one by to watch the symptoms and apply the remedies the instant they were needed.

The attack was violent inflammation, and, as soon as this was subdued, the patient recovered very rapidly, but he was in no hurry to part with his nurse, who, when her services were no longer wanted in that capacity, took upon herself the more pleasurable task of amusing the convalescent, by chanting merry lays, reading the newspapers aloud, and telling little anecdotes of the country people round about, which served to beguile many an hour that would otherwise have been very wearisome. Under these circumstances, it struck Lord Merrington that, upon the whole, he was more obliged to the individual who had taken so much pains to keep him in this world, than to the one who cared not how soon he should betake himself to the next, and, with this conviction full upon his mind, he, on the receipt of Mr. Grantley's anonymous revelation, offered his hand to the surprised and delighted Elizabeth, who, in the joy of her heart, put on her bonnet and shawl, and tripped nimbly across the fields, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, to inform her no less surprised and delighted parents that she was going to be Lady Merrington, and ride in her own carriage.

All this had taken place two days before Captain Romer presented himself at Brianscourt, and as it had become pretty well known amongst the servants how the case was likely to terminate, they did not feel it necessary to pay the same deference as before to one who now held his heirship by a very uncertain tenure, and might never succeed to the title after all. Hence arose the unceremonious airs of the footman, and the peculiar smile that had flickered on the usually imperturbable countenance of Mr. Gibson on the occasion of Captain Romer's visit, both those gentlemen being aware that Miss Fowler was, at that

very moment, with their lord, busily engaged in choosing dresses from a heap of silks and satins that had been sent by his order from the best shop in the neighbouring town for her inspection.

Romer had lingered for nearly a week at the inn, vainly expecting to be sent for; but the only reply he received to his daily message of inquiry concerning the health of Lord Merrington was, that his lordship was much better.

At length a slight variation occurred, it might be on the fifth or sixth morning of his sojourn in the country, for, instead of the verbal message that had been returned on each preceding day, there came a sealed note, which he hastily tore open, in the full expectation that it was a summons for him to show himself at Brianscourt forthwith; but what was his astonishment, his rage, his consternation, on reading these words:—

“SIR,—I am desired by Lord Merrington to inform you that his lordship was married this morning to Miss Elizabeth Fowler, now Lady Merrington, in the private chapel at Brianscourt, by the Rev. Alexander Mackenzie, Rector of Bleachley.

“I have the honour to be, sir,

“Your obedient servant,

“PETER GIBSON.”

Romer's first proceeding was to vent his fury on the innocent paper by tearing it furiously into a great many pieces and throwing them about the floor. He then thought of shooting, or otherwise putting an end to himself; but, as he did not carry out these views, it may be presumed they were not precisely to his taste. He remembered, too, that it was very likely Lord Merrington would never have any other heir than himself, and also that there were many

ladies besides Florence Gilmour who had fortunes to bestow ; therefore, after expending the violence of his wrath and indignation in a thousand invectives against every member of his uncle's household, including the noble lord himself, and his young bride, he hastily packed up his portmanteau and returned to town.

CHAPTER XXIV.

For ten days Florence had remained in the most torturing state of suspense, neither seeing nor hearing from her father, whose cruel silence she was utterly at a loss to interpret. Perhaps he was gone to bring home the daughter he had spoken of, and if so, what was to be her own future position in his house? This was a question that involved much serious reflection, for though she felt that she could be content to share her inheritance with the unknown, and treat her as a sister, yet pride revolted against the idea of giving place to her as the superior; and she thought it would be even easier to sacrifice all than submit to a humiliation equally mortifying and undeserved. But in this she was not destined to be tried, for the evil appeared in a form harder in reality to bear, though less wounding to the dignity of a sensitive mind.

On the tenth day of her father's absence there came by post a very large letter, with a very large seal, addressed to herself in a stiff, business-like hand, which she knew at once to be that of the solicitor who had written to her before, and tore it open with a trembling hand and beating heart,

anxious, yet dreading, to see the contents, for she felt they would be unpleasing, though in what manner, and to what extent, she had yet to learn. The truth, however, was even worse than her worst fears had conjectured, for she found that her father had actually sailed for India; gone without a single word of farewell, and left her unprotected, and almost unprovided for, to seek a home amongst strangers, and find her way alone in a world of which she had so little knowledge or experience.

It was some time before she could bring her mind to believe in the reality of a blow so overwhelming as this, for she had expected that, even in the event of being banished from his house, he would at least provide her an asylum, and furnish her with the means of living; but he had done neither so far as she could understand from the letter in her hand, which she read over several times in the hope of discovering some other meaning than that which appeared on the first perusal. It was a vain endeavour. The facts were stated as plain matters of business, requiring neither comment nor softening; for her correspondent, although a very upright and well-intentioned man, was wholly devoid of anything like sentiment, and it was his opinion that all he had to do with the affair was to make her acquainted with certain circumstances in which she was legally interested, and take her instructions as to a sum of one thousand pounds, which, by the provisions of her uncle's will, she would be entitled to claim on the day she should attain the age of twenty-one, and as it only wanted about three weeks to that time, and the money was in his hands, he desired to know whether he should invest it for her in any way, or pay it over to herself. He said that it would be advisable for her to leave the house in Belgrave Square as soon as possible, as Major Gilmour had instructed him to employ an agent to let it furnished for twelve months, and had also given directions that the plate and other

valuables of which he, the lawyer, had an inventory, should be placed in the care of his bankers. With regard to any money Miss Gilmour might require to pay off the servants and settle any other matters previous to her departure, he had authority to advance it, and would wait upon Miss Gilmour at any time she might appoint, to take her commands.

Florence knew nothing whatever of business—indeed, how should she? and to her wounded spirit this dry, matter-of-fact letter appeared the most cruel, heartless, unfeeling epistle ever dictated by human heart or penned by human hand; yet the worthy writer was wholly guiltless of cruelty, heartlessness, or want of feeling, and would have been very much astonished no doubt if anybody had told him he had produced so unfavourable an impression. The desertion of her father was a severe, and certainly an unexpected, blow to Florence, who, notwithstanding all he had said, never believed that he would carry his resentment to such an extremity. She was coolly told it was desirable that she should leave the house—her father's house—her own natural home; but where was she to go? How was she to find another dwelling-place? Her thoughts naturally turned towards the Bassets, but the idea of seeking an asylum with them in her distress was intolerably painful, for she had reason to believe that Emily at least, and perhaps other members of the family, suspected her of more than an ordinary regard for Norman, and so long as she was superior to him in wealth and station, this gave her no uneasiness; but now, what might they think—what might Norman himself think, if she were to throw herself upon their protection? The same reason deterred her from writing to tell them what had happened and to ask their advice, for she was quite sure they would say, “Dear Florence, come to us.” She therefore determined to consult the man of law, whom she knew to be a just man, and one in whom she could place trust, however deficient he

might be in sympathetic feeling, and she wrote to him accordingly, requesting that he would call upon her the next day. She had seen him more than once, so that she was not unacquainted with his formal address and somewhat repellent manners, which was so far fortunate that it prevented her from ascribing them, as she otherwise might have done, to the existing circumstances, which had no more effect upon the feelings of the gentleman in question (supposing he had any) than a handful of feathers flung against a stone wall. She had hoped to learn something more in this interview of her father's intentions, but the cautious lawyer either could not, or would not, give her any information, confining himself strictly to the business he had come about, and so carefully avoiding every other subject that she remained uncertain whether he did or did not know the object of Major Gilmour's voyage to India, and how far he was acquainted with the circumstances that had occasioned the present disagreement between her father and herself. One thing, however, there could be no doubt about, which was, that, however much he might know, it was certainly his intention to keep it to himself, and although Florence felt as if her heart was breaking, she had too much spirit to betray her feelings before this icy stranger, difficult as it was to restrain them, and listened with forced calmness to all he thought proper to communicate, which was little more than a repetition of what his letter had contained, except indeed, that she was at liberty to remain in the house, and retain the present establishment during the few weeks that she would still be a minor.

"And what am I to do then, sir?" she asked, with a bewildered look.

"I presume, madam, you will make your own arrangements," the gentleman replied, in a tone which plainly said "that is no affair of mine."

"How long do you suppose my father will be absent?"

"I am not aware that he has fixed any time for his return."

"Do you mean, sir, that it is likely he will not come back to England?"

"It is quite possible, madam; nevertheless, I beg to say that I have no authority for stating that such is his intention; nor has it much to do, I believe, with the business between you and me at this moment."

"Not much, indeed," repeated Florence, sighing deeply. "Yet you cannot be surprised that I should wish to obtain all the information you can give on a subject so important to me."

"I am not at all surprised, ma'am; but, as it is not in my power to give any information whatever, you will perhaps do me the favour to say what your wishes are with regard to Mr. Kenneth Gilmour's bequest."

Florence said she should be glad to leave the money in his hands, and draw upon him from time to time for such sums as she might require, trusting that, before the fund was exhausted, her father would return and make some more suitable provision for her.

The lawyer, after a few minutes' consideration, replied,—

"As it appears doubtful whether any other provision will be made, I should advise you to act as if you had no such expectation."

"I have nothing to expect, then, and he knows it—" was the thought that instantly crossed the mind of Florence, who, however, made a strong effort to suppress that painful rising in the throat which can only be relieved by tears, and said quietly, "Will you be so good, sir, as to tell me what I had better do?"

"It depends on whether you have other resources."

"I have nothing else—that is all."

"Then I should advise you to get the best interest

you can, and infringe as little as possible on the principal."

Florence looked as if she did not exactly comprehend what he meant, on which he explained to her several different ways of investing her money so as to produce from fifty-five to sixty pounds a year, which to her, who had been accustomed to spend much more than that with her milliner, seemed as nothing in the light of a maintenance, and she could not help saying,—

"Will it be possible to live upon so little as that?"

"I should imagine quite possible," replied the lawyer. "However, if you think it desirable for the money to be so placed that in case of difficulty you can draw upon the principal, I can get you five per cent. for it—in fact, I will be responsible for that amount of interest so long as the money remains in my hands, and for what more you may want, of course you will apply to me. I shall also be obliged if you will communicate with me as soon as you have made your arrangements for leaving Belgrave Square."

Florence bowed her head in token that she would attend to this last request, for she could not trust her voice with a reply, and it was a great relief to her when the solicitor took his leave, for it had been a most painful effort to preserve a calm demeanour in his presence, and the moment he was gone the pent up streams gushed forth with tenfold violence from having been so long restrained, nor did she make the least attempt to stop their course, but suffered them to flow on without control until the fountain of the heart was exhausted. Feeling somewhat tranquillised by this outpouring of her sorrows, she was able to look more steadily at the prospect before her, and to realise to herself the true position in which she was placed. That her father had entirely discarded her she could no longer doubt, and it was equally evident that he was gone to bring his future heiress from India. The solicitor had certainly hinted at the pro-

bability of his not returning to England again, in which case it was perhaps his intention to settle in France or Italy, where he might introduce his hitherto unacknowledged child as his only and legitimate daughter. It was a galling thought, yet now that she knew the worst, she felt more at ease than while in uncertainty, and did not for one moment regret the course she had herself taken.

"I have not deserved to be thus treated," she said, "but the alternative was infinitely worse; and whatever my future lot may be, thank Heaven I am saved from the misery of being married to a man I despise. Others have met with reverse of fortune, and why should I not bear it as well as they? Yes, Claudia shall see, and Norman too shall see, that I am not wanting in fortitude any more than themselves.—Norman—Ah! I fear I think of him too much and too often. Yet, if it were not for that—but I must think of other things now, for I have a new life to begin."

Banishing all other thoughts from her mind, she began seriously to consider what it would be best for her to do, and at length she concluded that her first object must be to find a home, and her next, to devise some plan whereby to increase the trifling income secured to her by her uncle's legacy. Home! How much is comprehended in that little word, how very much beyond the shelter of a roof or the luxuries of a table! It is the watchword of peace and happiness and love; where these are not among the inmates of your dwelling-place, there your abode may be, but not your home. Yet in glancing over the advertising columns of *The Times*, one might fairly conclude that "to find a home" must be the very easiest thing in the world; and to read of all the comforts, possible and impossible, that are to be everywhere obtained, the only wonder is, why anybody should ever be uncomfortable.

~ One of these promising advertisements appeared

to offer to Florence a very desirable place of refuge in her present difficulty, and she answered it without delay, having made up her mind to leave her father's house as soon as she had found another place of abode; for the servants had begun to wonder why she refused to see any visitors, and their very respect seemed to her like mockery, feeling, as she did, that she was no longer their mistress. The advertisement she answered was addressed to "Ladies of limited income," and set forth, in glowing terms, the manifold delights of a certain domicile in the good town of Newbury, where any lady of small means might be accommodated with board and lodging of first-rate excellence, incomparable society, and all the pleasures of home, without its cares and anxieties, for the small stipend of fifty pounds a-year.

Florence received a letter in reply to hers, which induced her to decide at once upon going to Newbury, where she intended to give lessons, if she could get any pupils to take them—in music, French, and drawing—in all of which she was sufficiently accomplished to teach in a country town; and having thus far settled her plans, she wrote to the solicitor, saying that she was going to leave Belgrave Square immediately, and requesting that he would take upon himself the trouble of discharging the servants, and making all other necessary arrangements after her departure.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE autumn was far advanced, and the day was as dreary and comfortless as could well be imagined, when Florence Gilmour arrived at her new abode with a heart as cheerless as the scene around her. The wind wailed mournfully among the trees, sending down showers of yellow leaves with every blast, whilst a drizzling rain, not heavy enough to hold its straight course downward, but drifted this way and that at the caprice of the ungentle gale, added to the general discomfort of this most melancholy day. Florence had kept up her spirits pretty well, until she drove away from the door of her father's house, and heard it shut against her for ever; then all the desolateness of her situation rushed upon her mind with full force, and she did, indeed, feel wretched and lonely. So long as the right had remained to her of entering that house, and calling it "home," she had hardly believed in the reality of her exiled and orphaned condition, but when the door was closed, never to be opened to her again, the sound was so strange, so chilling, that it fell like a weight of ice upon her heart, and was still haunting her remembrance when she reached the

gate of Cranberry Lodge, the dwelling-place fate had for the present assigned her. It was a large, very old and dingy-looking brick-built house, standing far back in a garden, not in very good order, but presenting to the eye unsightly relics of the last flowers of the season, some still clinging tenaciously, discoloured and drooping, to the parent stem, while others were lying in decayed fragments on the beds where they had bloomed and died. There were a few fruit-trees too, apples, pears, and cherries, which served the purpose of holding out temptation to all the idle mischievous boys in the good town of Newbury, whose nightly depredations were a never-failing source of disquiet to the mistress of the mansion.

There was no carriage-drive up to the entrance of the house, and, in consequence of that inconvenience, as soon as the fly drew up to the gate, an untidy-looking servant-girl ran out with an umbrella, whilst three female heads disappeared from one of the windows, and immediately afterwards became visible, with the bodies belonging thereunto, within the doorway.

These component parts formed the Owen family, consisting of Mrs. Owen, the lady of Cranberry Lodge, and the two Misses Owen, her offspring; but which was the mother and which were the daughters, it was not easy at first sight to determine, as they were all three tall and prim in person, with those wiry, frigid faces, that defy all speculation as to age; and they wore the same kind of head-dress, not exactly a cap, but some nondescript article, manufactured out of black lace and blue ribbon. Their dresses, too, were of the same pattern, and so scanty, as to warrant a suspicion that the three had been contrived, by skilful management, out of two dress-lengths; and there were other points of resemblance, especially in the thin, sharp tone of voice common to all, that rendered the similarity more perfect.

The impression made upon Florence by this first view of the people with whom she was to be domesticated was certainly not an agreeable one; but her mind was so entirely pre-occupied by her own affairs, that she had little attention to bestow on those peculiarities of dress and manner, that at another time, and under other circumstances, might perhaps have afforded her some amusement.

Each lady welcomed the new boarder with a formal speech, evidently got up for the occasion, and she was then shown to her sleeping-room, which was large, and not badly furnished; but the first thing she observed was, that it had no fire-place, a deficiency that was perhaps rendered more noticeable by the gloominess of the day; and she mentioned it to Mrs. Owen, who looked at one of her daughters, and said, in a significant manner,—

“Miss Gilmour can have your room, Jane, if she prefers one with a fire-place; but it will be time enough to talk of that as the winter comes on; it would be a sin to begin to think about fires yet.”

Florence cast a shivering glance towards the window, which disclosed a view quite wintry enough to justify the thought that a cheerful blaze would at that moment be extremely comfortable; however, as no one seemed to take up that idea, although the rain was pattering against the glass, and the window-frames were rattling in the wind, she did not express her opinion on the subject, but silently followed the ladies to the drawing-room. The apartment thus designated was a large old-fashioned, wainscoted room, covered with a printed drugget, of a showy pattern, and furnished with twelve chairs, ranged in order against the walls, the frames painted in imitation of rosewood, and the cushions cased with brown holland; a sofa, to match; and a loo table standing in the middle of the apartment. These, with the addition of some shells, and two small glass chandeliers on the mantelpiece, were literally all that the

room contained ; for there was not a book, a sign of any kind of work, or even an inkstand, to show that the drawing-room was ever used for any other purpose than to sit in ; and this promised to be but a dull sort of occupation, as it was evident the Owens were not a musical family, nor was their conversation particularly brilliant.

The prominent idea that suggested itself to the mind of Florence, as she surveyed this cold, comfortless room of state, was, "How different from Bridge House !" and as she looked at the cheerless grate, ornamented with green and white cut paper, she recalled to memory a certain evening in the summer, when, it being damp and chilly, a good fire was made in the little parlour, and the whole family, Norman included, with Freshfield Ray and Mr. Ingleby, drew round it and amused themselves and each other with enigmas and various fireside pastimes. It was one of the happiest evenings she had spent there, and she remembered it now with a sigh of intense regret.

At length the girl who had before appeared, and who was the only domestic belonging to the establishment, came to say that the tea was ready, and the whole party adjourned to what appeared to be the common sitting-room, by the work-boxes, knitting-baskets, and other tokens of industry that met the eye. There were a few books, too, ranged on three little shelves, about two feet in length, strung together, and hung against the wall like a bird-cage ; and there was also a well-worn backgammon-board, to which one of the ladies directed Miss Gilmour's attention as an endless source of amusement, saying, by way of enhancing its attractions, that they never played for money. The tea was very weak, and was poured out by Miss Hannah, who rather surprised Florence, by asking whether she took white sugar or brown.

"We all take brown," said the mamma, "for we

consider it more wholesome; but there is white, if you prefer it."

"I certainly do prefer it," replied Florence, looking with disgust at the very coarse brown sugar with which Miss Hannah was sweetening the tea; but she did not see the significant looks exchanged between the other two ladies, which said as plainly as looks can speak,—

"White sugar is rather too much of a good thing for fifty pounds a year."

The tea being over, Florence was asked whether she would like to sit in the drawing-room or in the parlour, to which she replied that it was a matter of indifference to her.

"Then we will stay here," said Miss Jane; "for we hardly ever use the drawing-room but when we have company, because we don't like to make a litter there with our work. I suppose you do knitting or crochet, or something of that kind?"

Florence said she sometimes did a little fancy work, and asked several questions relative to the various specimens of handicraft she saw in progress, and looked at the patterns exhibited by the Misses Owen, expressing all the admiration that seemed to be expected. While this inspection was going on, a double knock at the door announced a visitor.

"Now I would venture any money," said Miss Jane, "that it's Mary Turner—I knew she wouldn't wait till to-morrow. She is come on purpose to look at you, Miss Gilmour, for I told her this morning we had a young lady coming to board with us, and she is so very inquisitive."

"And such a gossip," added the sister; "she will never rest till she knows all about you; but I would advise you not to tell her anything you wouldn't like all the town to know."

"Hush—sh—sh!" whispered Jane, with a warning look towards the door, which at that moment was opened by the lady in question, a brisk little person,

smartly dressed, who tripped into the room in the liveliest manner possible; and the Owens, notwithstanding the unfavourable sentiments they had just expressed, declared they were delighted to see her.

"It is so kind of you," said one, "and in the rain and all; I am so glad, for I was afraid Miss Gilmour would be very dull if nobody came in this evening."

"To be sure," responded the visitor, "it makes an agreeable change; but you haven't introduced me, Jane."

The ceremony of introduction was gone through in due form, and Miss Turner then considered herself properly qualified to ask all manner of impertinent questions, which Florence answered civilly, but coldly and with much reserve; so that the querist did not obtain the information she had come expressly to seek, and this disappointment caused her to report the next day to all her friends that the Owens' boarder was the stiffest, most disagreeable thing she ever saw in her life. Her visit lasted about an hour, and as soon as she was gone, the mother and sisters began with one accord to launch forth the shafts of malice and satire against her in a most unmerciful manner, till Florence, weary, disgusted, and sick at heart, retired to her own apartment on a plea of fatigue, glad to escape from such uncongenial associates.

Once more alone and at liberty to indulge in her own meditations she began to consider what means she could take to find some other place of residence, having already seen enough of the Owens to decide upon not remaining with them for a longer period than suited her own convenience. The worst trial was now over, and her natural high spirit was fast resuming its ascendancy over her mind, aided, perhaps, by a secret desire to prove herself worthy of the esteem of him whose esteem was to her of infinite worth. Firm, however, to her first resolution, she would not write to the Bassets till her abode and

occupation were fixed, and all her energies were directed towards this end, being no less anxious for the consolation their sympathy would afford her, than for relief from her present uncomfortable situation. Her first object was to ascertain whether there was any likelihood of getting pupils in Newbury; therefore, on the following morning at breakfast, she spoke of her intentions, and inquired whether there were any families in the neighbourhood to whom she could offer her services as a teacher.

The effect produced on the countenances of all the ladies by this disclosure and query was so truly ludicrous that Florence could scarcely help laughing. To think that their boarder, whom they had boasted of to all their acquaintances as a gentleman's daughter, and a young lady of independent fortune, should turn out after all to be nothing better than a governess!—They drew up their heads in dignified silence, compressed their thin lips, and cast expressive glances towards each other, which seemed to say—"Here's a pretty discovery!"

Miss Hannah, in consequence of this unexpected revelation, watching her opportunity, adroitly extracted a lump of white sugar from Miss Gilmour's cup, and substituted half a teaspoonful of brown, while Miss Jane said, rather tartly, "they really did not know of anybody wanting a governess; in fact, they had not the least idea that Miss Gilmour had come there to look out for a situation."

"Nor is that exactly the case, Miss Owen," replied Florence. "All I desire to do is to give a few lessons in music, French, and Italian."

"It is just the same thing," observed Mrs. Owen. "For my part, I see no difference between that and a common governess."

"Nor I either," said one of the younger ladies,— "however, you know your own affairs best, and if you want pupils you had better ask at the Library if they can recommend you to any."

Florence thanked her for the hint, and said she should lose no time in acting upon it; but, as she rose from the table, Mrs. Owen, with that prudent foresight which often distinguishes ladies who receive strangers into the bosom of their families, promising them 'all the comforts of a home,' said,—

"You mentioned something about a fire in your bed-room, Miss Gilmour; of course that would be charged extra."

"Very well, ma'am," Florence answered. "I am willing to pay for any accommodation beyond what is usual;" and so saying, she left the room.

"Did you ever see such airs?" said Miss Jane. "She walks as stately as if she fancied herself a duchess. It is really quite ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous indeed!" responded the sister—"and her father, I suppose, some poor half-pay officer—I wish we had known it before I said so much about her to the Holcrofts."

"Mary Turner is a great deal worse than the Holcrofts; a fine story she'll make of it—I think we had better go and call upon her, and say how shocked and surprised we are at being so deceived." Miss Hannah admitted the good policy of being themselves the first to announce the startling intelligence to the deceived ladies of Newbury, that the person who had thus surreptitiously forced herself into the polite circles of that bright spot of the earth was an impostor; for the Owens gave out that their only motive in receiving a stranger amongst them was to enlarge the social circle around the domestic hearth; or, in other words, that they wanted a genteel boarder merely for the sake of society.

While this discussion was going on in the parlour, Florence went to the Library, and seeing no one in the shop but a young man who was evidently not the master, she gave her card, requesting to see Mr. Routh; on which the young man walked to the far end of the shop where a small space was railed off

apparently to serve the purpose of a counting-house, and having put the card through the railing, and said a few words in a low tone of voice, an elderly gentleman in spectacles issued forth, and bowing to Florence with a look of inquiry awaited her commands. She at once explained her business without any hesitation or embarrassment, and as soon as the librarian fully understood what it was she desired, he said that, if she chose to place her name on his books she might be informed of every family in Newbury wanting teachers, until she succeeded in making an engagement. The fee, he did not forget to add, was half-a-guinea. This she readily paid, and then Mr. Routh, with more politeness than he generally used towards professional persons requiring his assistance, gave her a note of introduction to a Mrs. Copeland, the wife of a surveyor who lived about half-a-mile off, and she availed herself of it without delay.

She found Mrs. Copeland a lady-like, well-educated person, of easy, agreeable manners, which did away in great measure with the repugnance she might otherwise naturally have felt to commence a life so new and strange; for it is not the occupation, but the contumely with which it is so often attended, that embitters the governess's lot, and makes many a one shrink from employing her time and talents to a useful end, who would willingly do so, were she certain of meeting with the respect she feels her due.

Mrs. Copeland, it appeared, had four children, whom she had herself instructed hitherto, but as they were now beyond childhood, the task had become too arduous without assistance; therefore, after a long conversation, it was settled that Florence should attend four hours every morning, to give lessons in music, French, Italian, and drawing, while the mother continued to do her part as before.

The salary was to be five guineas a month, and with this addition to her own stipend, Florence thought she might do very well. Before she took her

leave, Mrs. Copeland led her to the schoolroom, where she was introduced to her future pupils, four pretty little girls, the eldest about thirteen, who looked at her with the shyness and curiosity children naturally feel at the first sight of a new governess, but they laughed merrily, and answered all she said to them as if they thought they should like her very well. In her way back she called at the Library to tell Mr. Routh she had entered into an engagement with Mrs. Copeland, at which he expressed great satisfaction, partly, no doubt, because he really was struck by the superiority of her person and manners; but it was also possible that he did not lose sight of the fact, that in case she should require to place her name on his books again, it would be another half-guinea.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE lodging provided for Norman Basset by the rector's lady was in one of a neat row of houses standing on the high road, a little way out of Andover. The landlady was an elderly gentlewoman, who kept one servant, and made her small income into a larger one by letting her first floor when she could, to a single gentleman, and "doing for him," as she phrased it; which "doing for" consisted in managing his little domestic affairs to the best advantage, not exactly for him, but for herself. For instance, her servant usually breakfasted off the lodger's loaf and butter; the vegetables bought for him were always very dear; and his tea and coffee being made down stairs, generally served all the three; but, as he was unconscious of the fact, his peace of mind was undisturbed thereby, and as mistress and maid were both very civil and obliging, he was, upon the whole, tolerably comfortable. He had now been quietly settled in this abode for some weeks, and was already becoming extremely popular, not only among Mr. Robertson's parishioners, but all through and round about the town of Andover, where numerous reports were circulated respecting the rank, fortune, and con-

nections of the handsome young curate; some saying they had heard, on very good authority, that he was nearly related to a rich Indian nabob; others, that they knew for certain his uncle was a lord, and that he had great expectations. A few persons went so far as to assert that he was on the point of marriage with a young lady of immense fortune, but this was generally disbelieved, especially by the spinsters, who agreed in setting it down as a false and malicious report. Now most of these rumours owed their origin to a certain thick-headed boy, whose mother lived at Andover, and who was occasionally employed on the Hill Farm to scare away the crows.

It happened that when Captain Romer paid a visit at Bridge House, this lad held his horse, and was afterwards told by one of the stable-boys at the inn where the captain was staying, that the gentleman was nephew to a great lord; and hearing from his mother that the curate of the New Church often went to Bridge House, he somehow or other confused the identity of the clergyman and the captain, thus giving rise to the many and various contradictory statements that agitated the public mind as far as their influence extended. There was one person, indeed, resident at Andover, who might have given a truer version of Norman's private history, had she chosen so to do, but she had her own reasons for concealing her knowledge of his family affairs, and listened to the gossip of her neighbours just as if she knew nothing more than they did themselves. This was Mrs. Heaviside, the sentimental widow, who, it may be recollected, was at the dinner-party given by Mr. Basset, on the memorable day with which this story commences.

Her acquaintance with that gentleman was of long standing, and had arisen under circumstances which, in the opinion of those who take a common-place view of things, might have entitled him to some small share of her consideration, even in his humbled

condition; for her late husband had, in fact, owed the foundation of his prosperity to Mr. Basset's father, who, at the beginning of his career, lent him three thousand pounds, without any security whatever, to establish him in the concern that eventually made his fortune; and although the interest had been regularly paid, and the principal in course of time returned, yet it was quite certain that without such assistance he would never have had the opportunity of leaving his wife a rich widow; therefore, it might be affirmed with truth, that she was indebted to the Basset family for her present comfortable position in the world.

The deceased Mr. Heaviside was a manufacturer, and the owner of extensive cotton-mills in the north of Staffordshire. He had, in the course of twenty years, amassed a store of worldly wealth, by extracting the utmost amount of labour he was entitled to claim from his workpeople, never giving anything away, nor in any case paying a single fraction more than he was lawfully obliged to pay; and it was in consequence of this prudent method of conducting his affairs, that he obtained the reputation of being a hard master, and a very questionable kind of Christian. He certainly was not a particularly tender husband, so that when he died, his lady's mourning was not of the heart, but of the head and general person; and even these outward emblems of sorrow were discarded so much sooner than custom warrants on such occasions, that the ladies of Andover were utterly scandalised by a breach of decorum so unprecedented. In strict propriety she ought still to have been wearing the plain cap and sable attire that denotes a state of widowhood; whereas, she had for several months past been flaunting in all the colours of the rainbow, and looking just as if there had never been a Josiah Heaviside to be lamented, or if there were, that she was not the person deputed to lament him. She had fixed her abode in Hamp-

shire immediately after his death, having both property and connections in that county, and the house in which she resided, with its pretty grounds well laid out and carefully tended, was her own. Her establishment consisted of a man, who was coachman, footman, gardener or groom, as occasion required, two women-servants, a boy, and the niece, who has already been introduced to the reader by the name of Alice Compton, and who acted in the double capacity of lady's maid and companion.

Poor Alice! From the age of nine years she had occupied what is, with very few exceptions, the most unenviable post in any family, that of dependent relative. All other subordinates in a house have their defined position, and their respective duties assigned to them accordingly; but the poor relation has no position, and generally has to perform, without fee or reward, the work of half a dozen menials, each of whom would be paid for services which the unfortunate dependent is expected to render gratuitously, and at the same time to acknowledge a grateful sense of obligations conferred. Had there been any little Heavisides, it is probable that Miss Compton might have had to take upon herself the duties of assistant nursery-maid, in addition to her other appointments; but, happily for her, the House of Heaviside was unblest with any such interesting pledges of affection, and her sphere of action was therefore limited to the departments abovementioned, in each of which she held no sinecure.

For more than fifteen years Alice had saved her aunt at least thirty pounds annually in wages and needlework, yet the world said, "What an amiable creature Mrs. Heaviside must be, to have maintained that poor orphan girl for so long a period." The poor orphan would perhaps have been better clothed, less severely tasked, and spared many a bitter pang, had she been sent out to serve strangers. But it is thus the world judges of such things, for its know-

ledge goes no deeper than the surface ; it sees not the cold looks, it hears not the cruel taunts, it knows nothing of the minute details that make the happiness or misery of daily life, or of the slights and mortifications that so often poison the cup of the dependent relation. Habit, however, is second nature, and the poor girl had been so long accustomed to live in a state of petty thralldom, that it never once occurred to her simple mind that she might shake it off and trust to herself ; but this required a degree of spirit she never thought of exercising, for her energies, if she had any, had lain dormant under the depressing influence of a life without object or interest, and so she went on quietly from day to day, and from year to year, wearing out her aunt's old gowns, bearing with all her ill-humours, and wondering how people felt who had it in their power to do as they pleased.

Mrs. Heaviside knew perfectly well that the Bassets were residing within a visiting distance, but she had not taken advantage of that circumstance to keep up her intimacy with them, or return in any way the many civilities they had shown her personally, besides the important service rendered to her husband, of which she was now enjoying the benefits ; in fact, it was not agreeable to her to bear those things in mind, perhaps because she knew that her feelings were extremely sensitive, and avoided as much as possible the remembrance of obligations, for fear they should overwhelm her with a weight of gratitude too heavy to bear. Besides, how could she introduce the occupants of such a place as Bridge House to her dear friends the Isherwoods and the Selwyns ; Sir Thomas Isherwood being the Lord of the Manor, and Mr. Selwyn a member of Parliament who had married a lady of fortune and kept two carriages ? It was quite out of the question : therefore the amiable widow determined to know nothing about the vicinity of the Bassets, and always took her morning drives in an opposite direction.

At length, however, her mind received a new bias from the sensation produced by the appearance of Mr. Robertson's new curate, and she began to think it was the duty of all good Christians to afford the light of their countenance to friends in adversity. Under the influence of these kindly feelings, she said one morning to her niece,—

“Alice, I shall go and call on the Bassets to-day. Poor dear girls! I am really grieved to think they should be immersed (perhaps she meant immured) in that lonely place. I must bring them out, and let them see a little society—it will be a charity.”

“Oh! I shall be so glad to see Miss Basset again,” exclaimed Alice, her plain face lighted up with joyful surprise. “But I thought, ma'am, you said you could not introduce them to Lady Isherwood because——”

“You thought indeed!” interrupted the lady, contemptuously; “and what signifies what you thought, I should like to know? I wish you would not be quite so fond of thinking, and recollect that it is time enough for you to give your opinion when it is asked.”

The humble companion received this rebuke in silence, like one accustomed to such indignities, and as she went on with her stitching there were no signs of emotion visible in her countenance to indicate whether her silence proceeded from apathetic indifference, a meek spirit, or a philosophic resolution to submit with patient endurance to the ills for which there was no remedy. For a few moments she cherished a vain hope that she might be ordered to attend her aunt upon this expedition, for Mrs. Heavyside had no objection to parading before the eyes of the admiring world, one who was considered as the object of her benevolence; but on this occasion she chose to go alone, and poor Alice was disappointed.

The visit of the widow caused more surprise than pleasure at Bridge House, for the Bassets had very good reasons for believing that she had known for a

long time that they were in the neighbourhood, and as she had not taken the slightest notice of them since the event of the fire, they did not know how to account for this sudden outburst of friendship, nor did they respond to it quite so warmly as they might have done if it had come before; but the fair visitor, nothing daunted by the somewhat cool reception she met with, took great pains to make herself agreeable, and did not altogether fail in her object.

“You really must come and see me, my dears,” she said; “and your dear papa too—I am so sorry he is not at home. By the way, I am told your brother is appointed curate of the new church. I go to St. John’s myself, it is so much nearer; but I shall be delighted to show him any attention for your sakes, so you positively must bring him with you when you come. That is the brother I have never seen, you know.”

The lady forgot perhaps at that moment that she went to the new church on the preceding Sunday, purposely to take a survey of Mr. Norman Basset before she committed herself so far as to pay a visit to his family; at any rate she made no mention of that circumstance, nor had the sisters the least idea that they were indebted to Norman’s powerful attractions for the extraordinary civilities thus unexpectedly lavished upon them.

Now it is not to be supposed that Mrs. Heaviside, who had scarcely seen fifty summers, and did not confess to more than two-thirds of that number; who, moreover, possessed a handsome competence and as many personal charms as money could purchase, in addition to those nature had given her,—it is not to be supposed, for an instant, that she could be at a loss for admirers, or would have the least difficulty in finding a successor to her late lord. But she was perfectly aware of her advantages, and not at all disposed to “cast pearls before swine.”

There was the tall Irish artist who lodged at a farm-house in the neighbourhood; he had made a

sketch of her dwelling, introducing into his picture a very flattering representation of herself walking on the lawn; and having sent this with his respectful compliments, he presumed on its acceptance to call occasionally; but then he was an awkward, shambling person, and had small, weak eyes, consequently was not a proper hero for her life's romance, which was only just beginning.

Then there was young Thorn, the sporting son of old Justice Thorn; but he was a boisterous horse jockey, far more at home in a stable than in a lady's boudoir—so he would not do.

The grave, learned Dr. Hinchcliffe, with his formal wig and gold-headed cane, had tried his lowest bow, and made his most elaborate complimentary speeches in vain; and the fat, rosy churchwarden, with his two fat, rosy children, had done his best to make himself agreeable, without producing the slightest effect on the widow's heart. But Norman was a hero of a different mould, and she was decidedly of opinion that such lustrous eyes as those would look remarkably well in her own drawing-room.

Before she took her departure from Bridge House, therefore, she insisted on Emily promising to spend the following week with her, which she was by no means unwilling to do; but Claudia declined making any engagement for herself, as she said she did not like to leave her father for a whole day, and he was too much out of health at present to accept any invitations.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“Do you know I am going on a long visit to Andover?” said Emily to Freshfield Ray.

“A long visit—when? Who are you going to visit?”

“Mrs. Heaviside; she is an old friend of ours, and has been here this morning to invite me.”

“Indeed! How is it then I have never heard of her till now as a friend of yours—she has not been here before, has she?”

“No.”

“And what has brought her now, do you suppose?”

“Oh! I don’t know. We have known her a long time; she used to visit us in London.”

“Yet you have been here some months, and she has never paid you a visit till to-day. That seems to me rather strange.”

“Well, Claudia and I were a little surprised to see her, certainly. Do you know her?”

“I know something of her, Miss Emily, and I do not believe her friendship is to be depended upon.”

“That is of no great consequence,” replied Emily, laughing; “we shall have no occasion to put it to the

proof I dare say ; she sees very good society I fancy, and it may be pleasant for Norman."

"For Norman!" echoed Freshfield. "Oh, now I begin to see—so, Norman is invited too, is he?"

"For shame, Mr. Ray ; I did not think you were so uncharitable."

"I hope you will never have reason to think me uncharitable, Miss Emily. When are you going, may I ask?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"So soon? And what is to become of me while you are away?"

"Become of you! What has my being away to do with that, I wonder."

"A great deal—everything. And you know it, Emily ; you know that all my happiness depends on you."

"I do not know it, Mr. Ray," said Emily, blushing deeply, and casting her eyes on the ground ; but she did not withdraw the hand he had taken in his.

"Then I tell you so now, dear, dear Emily. And I beg, I entreat you will be candid with me. I know my own deficiencies—I am conscious how rude and unpolished I must appear to one brought up as you have been—but I am sincere ; and when I say that I love you fondly and truly, indeed you may believe me."

Emily was confused and agitated by this avowal, although it was not wholly unexpected, and in her secret heart she was not at all displeased ; yet she hesitated to give so decided an answer as he desired, and the most he could obtain was a promise that she would think about it, and let him know her sentiments on her return. However, he seemed very well satisfied with the result of his declaration, expressing his thanks with all the ardour and gratitude of an accepted lover ; and when she reminded him that he was not justified in making quite so sure of a favourable answer, he replied as none but accepted lovers

are privileged to reply, a mode of speech which caused a few more blushes, but no particular demonstrations of anger. Freshfield was in the highest spirits all that evening, which Claudia was at a loss to account for until the mystery was explained by Emily as they were retiring to rest, who related all that had passed in the morning, to which her sister gave a joyful and attentive ear. It was one of the dearest wishes of her heart to see Emily united to such a man as Freshfield Ray, who was so eminently qualified to be her guide, her friend, and her protector, and she affectionately congratulated her on having gained the regard of one so truly estimable.

"But I have not made up my mind to have him yet, Claudy. Perhaps I may see somebody at Andover that I shall like better."

"Pray do not trifle with him, Emily," said Claudia, seriously, for she knew that Emily was rather fond of a little flirtation when she had the opportunity; "for, kind and good as he is, he would not bear it."

"Oh, nonsense! when a man is in love, he will bear anything."

"That is a great mistake, dear—I know enough of his character from Mr. Ingleby, to feel sure that anything like coquetry would excite his contempt. You like Mr. Ray, Emmy, I have seen it for some time, and I am very glad of it: he is a man calculated to make you very happy, and will do so I have no doubt; but you must treat him as he deserves to be treated, and not give him reason to suppose that you are vain and frivolous, as I am afraid you are inclined to be by what you said just now."

"Why, what did I say?"

"That you might see somebody at Andover you would like better. Do not let Mr. Ray hear you say such foolish things as that."

Emily laughed, and said she would be very careful.

"But how is it, Claudy, that you and Mr. Ingleby are on such confidential terms? Is the old gentle-

man in the same unfortunate predicament as Freshfield?"

Claudia coloured a little, and laughed.

"If he is," she said, "he has never said a single word to me about it."

"Oh! that is nothing—Freshfield never said a single word to me about it till this morning, and yet I have known it perfectly well for this long time."

"That may be, Emmy; but with regard to Mr. Ingleby, I do not think there is anything to know."

"How should you like him for a husband, Claudia?"

"Indeed, I have never asked myself the question, for it would be a very useless one—if I see you happily married, Emmy, I shall be quite contented. Good night, darling—remember what I have said, and if you are wise and prudent, I feel assured you have a life of happiness before you."

The next day, Freshfield sought in vain to renew the subject, for Emily contrived to be very busy with her preparations for the approaching visit, and would not give him the opportunity he wanted. However, he found a moment to say,—

"Emily, may I speak to your father?"

"Not till I have made up my own mind."

"And have you not done so?"

"No, certainly—I told you, I should take a week to consider."

And so saying, she snatched her hand from his and escaped up the stairs.

Freshfield was uneasy. "Can this be coquetry," he said to himself; "or is she really undecided?"

And in either case there was sufficient cause of anxiety, for, like all men of real worth, he was diffident of his own powers of pleasing, and tormented himself with a thousand groundless fears. Early on the following morning, Mrs. Heaviside's carriage came for Emily, and as her lover handed her into it, he said,—

"I shall think it an age till you return;" to which she answered mischievously,—

"Yet I dare say the time will seem short enough to me."

Mrs. Heaviside received her with such exaggerated expressions of affection, that anybody might well have wondered how she had contrived to exist so long without the society of one so dear to her, but Mr. Ray's observation with regard to Norman had thrown a light upon the matter which was not lost on Emily, although she had accused him of a lack of charity. However, she was in a frame of mind to be pleased with everything, and there is more in that than most of us are aware of, for we often fret and grumble over circumstances, calling them adverse and untoward when it is in reality our own minds that are at fault. Mrs. Heaviside had despatched a note to Norman Basset, informing him that his sister had been so very kind as to promise to spend a few days with her, and requesting that she might have the pleasure of his company at dinner on the Friday, to meet Sir Thomas and Lady Isherwood, to whom she wished to introduce Miss Emily Basset. Norman had returned a very polite answer, accepting the invitation, and the widow was consequently in the best possible humour: she shone all smiles, her visitor was caressed and flattered, and even poor Miss Compton was treated with more than ordinary favour, for, to her apparent astonishment, her aunt condescended to say,—

"Really Alice, my dear, you have trimmed that cap admirably."

"I am glad you like it, ma'am," responded Alice; but although she was totally unaccustomed to be called "my dear," and her looks plainly showed that she was so, she manifested no particular signs of pleasure at the unwonted epithet.

"It really is very pretty, Miss Compton," said Emily. "Mrs. Heaviside ought to think herself fortunate in having you for her milliner. If I had any-

body to make caps for, I should ask you to give me a lesson."

"I'm sure I should be delighted to teach you anything I know," said Alice, with sudden animation of voice and manner; and she looked at Emily with the bright smile that at times, though very rarely, illumined her countenance, making it almost handsome, in spite of the homeliness of her features.

On the first day of Emily's sojourn at Mrs. Heaviside's, some ladies who resided in the town came to tea by invitation, and the popularity of Norman displayed itself on this occasion by the civilities heaped upon his sister, who was in a state of siege the whole evening, each lady being anxious to secure the first place in her friendship, and holding out all sorts of allurements to attract her to their respective houses or apartments, as the case might be. One was doing the sweetest pattern in Berlin wool that was ever seen; another had a new duet that she should like so much to try with her, while a third would be delighted to show her how to make wax-flowers. In short every one seemed possessed with the desire of doing something very obliging, and the great difficulty was to avoid being overwhelmed with favours. Old Dr. Hinchcliffe came in too, in the course of the evening, but he had fallen many degrees in the estimation of the company present, his dull light being totally eclipsed by the bright luminary that had lately appeared. The next morning, Norman himself called, and as Mrs. Heaviside had foreseen the probability of his doing so, she had put on her most becoming morning gown and cap, and received him with the most flattering smiles and compliments. He did not stay many minutes, having to attend a vestry meeting, but as the following day was that fixed for the dinner-party the lady consoled herself for the brevity of this visit by looking forward to the morrow, and went out with Emily to make some morning calls, after which they took a drive into the open country.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“MAN appoints, and fate disappoints,” saith the old proverb, in which the word man is no doubt intended to be taken in a collective sense, as implying the human race in general, for everybody must know that at least nine-tenths of the disappointment parcelled out amongst mankind falls to the lot of the feminine portion of the species, and the proverb might often be rendered thus, “Woman appoints, and man disappoints,” as Mrs. Heaviside was destined to experience on that unlucky Friday which deceitfully dawned upon her with the brightest promise. But it is thus the buds of hopes are blighted just when they seem bursting into blossom. It is thus the cup of happiness falls from the hand at the very moment the lip touches its brim—it is thus—— In short, there are a great number of similes equally new and edifying, to which Mrs. Heaviside’s disappointment might be likened, if one were inclined to tax one’s memory for the same; but it may be asked, Why did she give her party on a Friday? Why did she fix upon a day of such ill omen for commencing the siege of the curate’s heart? What was she to expect from this open defiance, or at least imprudent negligence of the old

established rule respecting that inauspicious day, but a complete failure? Who ever heard of anything succeeding that was begun on a Friday? Who, having arrived at the conclusion of a great work at that unlucky period of the week, would not put off the finishing stroke till the following day? Norman had dined with Mr. Robertson on the Thursday, for the rector had become very fond of his company, and it was nearly eleven o'clock when he reached home.

"There's a parcel and a letter come for you, sir," said the girl, with a smirk on her face which he did not notice; but taking a light from her hand went into his own sitting-room, where he found both letter and parcel lying on the table.

The packet was carefully tied up and sealed at both ends, with an emblematical device representing a winged heart flying over a barrier, on which was inscribed the word "Prudence." Norman smiled slightly, but there was more of pity than of pleasure in his smile; of pity approaching to contempt, for this was not the first offering of the kind he had received, and he would willingly have dispensed with such favours. The parcel contained a pair of slippers, very beautifully embroidered on cloth with silk and gold thread, and these were accompanied by a sheet of pink embossed paper, on which were written in a small, but not very elegant hand, the following touching lines:—

"Oh! wear the gift I've worked for thee;
I offer it at friendship's shrine,
Although unworthy it may be
Of one both charming and *divine*."

"It is a pity when women have so little delicacy," he said to himself, throwing down the paper, after glancing his eye carelessly over it, and scarcely bestowing a look upon the splendid offering that must have cost the votary of friendship a vast deal of time and trouble, to say nothing of the expense; and

he then opened the other note, which interested him far more deeply than the poetical effusion that had elicited so ungallant an observation, for it was from his sister Claudia, and its contents were so unexpected, that, if he had accidentally touched an electric wire, the effect could not have been more startling than that produced by these few hurried lines :—

“ DEAR NORMAN,—

“ I have just received a letter from Florence Gilmour, which has surprised and grieved me more than I can express. I have not time to tell you the full particulars, but the substance is this—she has refused Captain Romer, and her father has entirely discarded her in consequence, and gone to India, leaving her so scantily provided for that she is under the necessity of taking pupils, and is, at present, very uncomfortably situated. Papa and I both think of asking her to come and live with us ; but we wish to have your opinion about it before we make the proposal. Let us see or hear from you as soon as possible.

“ Your affectionate

“ CLAUDIA.”

Norman read this note several times before he could credit the evidence of his own senses. Florence deserted—poor—almost friendless—teaching for her maintenance!—Could these things really be? His first feelings were of sorrow for her, and indignation against the unnatural parent who had forsaken such a daughter for such a cause ; but with these came other thoughts, for what might not his own hopes be from this change in her prospects? The seemingly impassable barrier that had subsisted between them was suddenly and rudely broken down by the very hand that alone could either uphold or remove it, and a vision of happiness floated indistinctly before him, like the shadowy outline which the artist's imagination invests with all the glowing tints

of a finished picture, whilst his eye rests only on the half-formed, colourless sketch. Then he blamed himself for selfishness in creating joyful images out of circumstances so lamentable and so distressing to her whose happiness was infinitely dearer to him than his own; and if it had rested with him to restore her to her own proper station by any self-sacrifice, he would not have hesitated for one moment between her interest and his own wishes; but it was not so—he had not the power to remedy the ills she was called upon to bear, and in this conviction he scarcely knew whether painful or pleasurable feelings were the most predominant. His first anxiety, however, was to learn more of the circumstances, and if it had not been so late he would certainly have taken a horse, and galloped over to Bridge House without a moment's delay; but, as it was past eleven o'clock, he was obliged to restrain his impatience as well as he could, and it required some effort, for he had two marriages to solemnise on the morrow, and a funeral service to perform in the afternoon, so that he would not be at liberty till about four o'clock, and he was engaged to dine with Mrs. Heaviside at five. On Saturday he knew that every hour would be occupied, and as to waiting till Monday, it was impossible; therefore he resolved to break his engagement with the widow on a plea of urgent business that required his presence elsewhere, and in the morning he wrote a polite note to that effect, but did not send it till the middle of the day. It was past six o'clock when Norman reached Bridge House, where he found his father and sister taking tea, and talking over the affair that had brought him there.

“Dear Norman,” said Claudia, “I am so glad you are come—I scarcely expected to see you so soon.”

“And I ought not to be here, Claudia; for I was engaged to dine with Mrs. Heaviside to-day. How do you do, sir? I am afraid these cold winds are not

very favourable for your cough," he continued, as he shook hands with his father.

"I am pretty well, Norman; as well, I suppose, as I ever shall be. But what made you disappoint the widow? That is a pity."

"Why, if I had not come to-day, I might not have had another opportunity for some time; and Claudia said you wished to see me as soon as possible."

"Yes, but there was no such very great hurry about it. We want to consult you as to what we can do for this poor young lady, Miss Gilmour. You know what has happened, I suppose?"

"I only know what Claudia told me in her note. Miss Gilmour's father, it seems, has left her, and gone abroad; but I have not heard any of the particulars."

"You shall see her letter presently," said Claudia, "but you must have some tea first."

"I can read the letter while I drink my tea," suggested Norman, who cared very little about the tea and very much about the letter; but, in order to account for his impatience, he added, "it will save time, and I have not much to spare."

"Very well, dear—I will get it for you directly. But how will you make your peace with Mrs. Heaviside?"

"I sent a note this morning to excuse myself; and, to tell you the truth, I am not particularly anxious on that score."

"I should be very sorry if you were, my dear boy," said his father, "for she is about as silly a woman as I know; and I should not like to see a son of mine,—that is—"and he corrected the expression with a profound sigh—"that is, I should not like to see my son linked to such a frivolous person."

"I have no pretensions that way, I assure you, sir," answered Norman, laughing; "and now I think of it, Mrs. Robertson gave much the same sort of opinion about her yesterday, but I thought it might

be prejudice, and paid no attention to it. So Major Gilmour is gone to India? Does he say it is his intention to remain there?"

"He has not made his intentions known—at least it appears so, from his daughter's letter."

"And what do you think of his conduct, sir?"

"I think it extremely cruel—cruel and tyrannical in the highest degree. But he is a proud, selfish, unfeeling man. I never thought Arthur Gilmour would have been what he now is. However, it matters little as far as he is concerned; but we must take care of the young lady for your poor mother's sake, Norman; the Gilmours were the only relations she had left."

"And what proposition do you think of making, sir? Miss Gilmour will never consent, I am sure, to become a burthen upon you."

"Nor will it be necessary; there is something, fifty pounds a year or so, left her by her uncle; she may live here very well upon that, in our plain fashion, without putting me to any expense, and she would certainly be more comfortable than amongst strangers, poor thing! Now, what I want to know is, whether you see any objection to this plan?"

"Not the least, sir; it is the very thing I should have advised. Where is she?"

"At Newbury," said Claudia; "but this will tell you all about it." And she put into his hand Florence's letter, which gave a circumstantial account of all that had taken place since she left Hampshire, suppressing only one fact, the existence of an illegitimate daughter. Norman read it with profound attention, and while he was thus engaged his father went into the farm for Freshfield Ray, who, he said, would be vexed if he did not see Norman before he went, and thus the brother and sister were left at liberty to converse with each other without reserve.

"Claudia," said Norman, "what is your opinion of this—do you think she will come?"

"I have some doubts about it, dear, for she has too high a spirit to submit to anything like living in a state of dependence, and it may be difficult to convince her that it would not be so."

"You have no other doubts about it, then?"

"None whatever; I think she would like to be with us better than anywhere else."

"You will not delay writing, I suppose?"

"No, certainly,—I shall write to-morrow; I only waited to see you."

"Then, let me know the moment you receive an answer; it will probably be on Tuesday morning, and you can send off that boy of Ray's immediately, without waiting for his going home in the evening. I will pay him for the loss of his day's work."

She looked at him with some surprise.

"You feel more than a friendly interest in this, Norman. Is it not so?"

"Yes, it is so; but only to you, Claudia, shall I say so much. Will you let me take this letter?"

"Yes, if you wish it. And suppose Florence should decline our offer?"

"In that case we must urge it more strongly—she must accept it. It may be presumption, Claudia, but I have sometimes thought that if circumstances had been no bar, I might have gained an interest in her heart."

"I have thought so too, Norman; but I was not sure that you had the desire to do so——"

"Nor had I, so long as it might have led to what has now occurred. Thank God! I have not been the cause of it."

"Ah! I see it all now. That was then the reason why you secluded yourself while she was staying here."

"It was so. I feared to trust myself; and I believe, to this hour she has no suspicion that I have any particular regard for her. Here come my father

and Freshfield. Do not betray my secret, Claudia, and remember your promise."

"You may trust me on both these points, dear ; your secret is safe till you choose to make it known yourself, and I will send to you as soon as I receive an answer to the letter I shall write to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE answer from Florence Gilmour was exactly such as Claudia had anticipated, full of gratitude and affection, yet positively declining the offer of a home she did not think she should be justified in accepting.

“Why should I be an incumbrance to my friends,” said she, “so long as I am able to support myself? I know what you would say to this, dear Claudia, but your kindness cannot alter the truth although it may gloss it over; and, believe me, I do not find this kind of life so hard to bear as I should have thought it would be. It seems to me that if I could lose all remembrance of the past, and be conscious only of the present, there is, in reality, no cause for unhappiness in the mere fact of having to occupy myself profitably for a few hours every day, and I feel quite reconciled to it, when I consider how much more useful a person I am now in the world than ever I was before. Do you remember a conversation we once had on the subject of a reverse of fortune? You then said I had not been tried. I little thought how soon the trial was to come; but now that it has come, I find I was not mistaken in the opinions I ex-

pressed. The change of circumstances alone gives me but little uneasiness, for I look upon it as the means by which I have avoided a much worse evil; and, viewing it in this light, it really seems no hardship. But it is hard, Claudia,—and this is a trouble you have never experienced,—to lose a parent's love, or rather to discover that you never possessed it; for, surely, if my father had ever loved me, he could not thus suddenly, and for so little cause, have left me in this cruel manner. There is one circumstance which I cannot explain by letter that in some measure accounts for why I have been so little cared for. I must reserve it till we meet. And oh! how delightful it is to me to know that we shall meet, for I do mean to visit you at Christmas, as my pupils will take holidays, and I shall be at liberty for a few days. When I am melancholy, I look forward to this pleasure to revive my spirits, and it never fails."

In one part of the letter she spoke of her intention to leave the Owens almost immediately, having heard of a more agreeable family in Newbury, where she would be received on the same terms; and to this she added, with a touch of her natural vivacity,—

"And if I should not be able to fraternize with the new people, I will have two nice little rooms of my own, live in solitary state, and take to writing poetry."

In another place she said,—

"I sometimes ask myself whether it is possible I can be the same person I was a few weeks ago; for, when I put on my bonnet in the morning to go out to my daily task, it seems as natural to me as if I had always been accustomed to it, which is a proof how very soon use reconciles us to anything, and how little there is in being a step higher or lower in the world, while we still have friends to love, and bright hours in prospect."

Throughout this long epistle the name of Norman was never once mentioned, nor the slightest allusion made to him; but it contained many grateful and af-

fectionate messages both to Mr. Basset and to Emily, especially the former, of whom she said,—

“I feel his kindness more than I can possibly express, and tell him that it is my greatest consolation to know that I have such a friend to look up to for protection in case of need, and that I should not hesitate to do so.”

True to her promise, Claudia sent off this letter without delay to Andover by the Mercury who had raised so many false rumours with regard to Norman, and was frequently charged with letters and messages for “the parson” as he familiarly styled him. It happened to be the day fixed for Emily’s return, and Mrs. Heaviside proposed to go with her in the hope, she said, of prevailing on Claudia to come to Andover for a few days, and of course Emily could make no objection, although she knew her sister would decline the invitation; but Mrs. Heaviside had another object in view which did not altogether fail, for in passing Norman’s lodgings she said, as if the idea had only that moment struck her,—

“Would you not like to call and say, ‘Good bye’ to your brother, my dear? He may have some message to send.”

Emily assented, and the carriage was stopped. Norman was at that moment reading Florence Gilmour’s letter, which so entirely absorbed his attention that he heard neither the loud knocking at the door that announced carriage visitors, nor the footsteps on the stairs that indicated the visit was to himself.

“Please, sir, two ladies want to speak to you,” said the servant, opening the door only just wide enough to put her head in, as if she was determined to guard the gentleman against a sudden surprise.

“Well, show them in,” he replied, very much annoyed, both at the interruption and the impolite mode of introduction adopted by the uncourtly hand-maiden. Fortunately his evident vexation was all attributed to the latter cause, and as he speedily

recovered his self-possession, it passed off very well.

“For goodness’ sake, Norman,” said Emily, when she had ceased laughing, “do teach that girl to announce visitors in a more elegant manner; it will take me a week to get over it.”

“Really, Emmy, I cannot undertake to instruct the Hampshire damsels in politeness, and as I am very seldom honoured with the visits of ladies, it is not of much importance, and I hope on this occasion it will be pardoned.” And he bowed to the blushing widow as he spoke.

“Oh! certainly, Mr. Basset; for my part I delight in those unsophisticated manners. But we must tell you why we have broken in upon your ‘lonely bower.’ This dear girl persists in leaving me to-day, and is come to say adieu, and to ask if you have any commands for home.”

“None, I thank you, for I intend to walk over myself presently to my father’s. It is too long a walk for you, I suppose, Emily?”

“But why should you walk, Mr. Basset?” said Mrs. Heaviside, eagerly. “Pray let us have the pleasure of your company; there is plenty of room in the carriage.”

“Oh! you are very good.”

“Do, Norman,” said Emily; “riding is much better than walking, and good company is better than no company at all.”

“That is an unanswerable argument I confess. Are you going directly?”

“Yes; we called here on our way.”

“Then, if you can wait ten minutes——”

“We can wait any time,” interrupted the widow, ‘all smiles and flutter’ at the thoughts of bliss so unexpected; and Norman withdrew to the adjoining apartment, ostensibly with a view to make some little alteration in his dress, but, in reality, to finish the perusal of the interesting letter he had hastily

put into his pocket, before the ladies entered the room.

During the ride his absence of mind was so remarkable, that his companions could not help noticing it, especially as, more than once, he gave answers quite irrelevant to the questions asked ; and when made aware of his error, laughed, coloured, and made the matter a great deal worse by trying to mend it.

Now all these symptoms of mental disturbance Mrs. Heaviside set down to a cause very foreign to the real one, but extremely satisfactory to herself, therefore she was in the highest spirits imaginable, and began to dream of white veils and orange-blossoms.

He did not go to dinner on the Friday, it was true, but he had called twice since, and his evident confusion now could not be on account of his sister Emily ; so that she might naturally conclude it was occasioned by herself, as there was no one else present, and she could not possibly be aware of the talisman he had so near his heart, it being in his left-hand waistcoat pocket. Under all these circumstances nothing could be more amiable than the lady's looks when she entered the parlour at Bridge House, where Claudia was sitting at work, and her father reading one of the periodicals.

She repeated all the flattering and obliging things she had said at her former visit, adding many more compliments to be placed to Mr. Basset's own private account.

"You cannot think how well you look," she said. "This Arcadian life has made you quite young again ; and such a little paradise of a place as you have here. I mean to come and see you very often I assure you ; it is so charming to renew old friendships."

Mr. Basset said he should always be very glad to see her ; for what else could he say ?

"Is there anything very interesting here, sir?"

inquired Norman, taking up the book his father had been reading.

"Yes, there is," Mr. Basset replied; "something that, I dare say, would interest you very much: it is a very clever sensible article, on the subject of Christian missions in India, written by a man named Villiers. I should like you to read it."

"Perhaps you will let me have the book when you have done with it?"

"Ray will, I dare say; it belongs to him."

"Ray!" echoed Mrs. Heaviside. "Pray is that the Hampshire giant?"

"Why, they call him so," I believe, replied Mr. Basset.

"Do you know him, Mrs. Heaviside?" asked Claudia.

"Yes, my dear—that is, I don't know much of him; but now I recollect, he is a near neighbour of yours. Miss Emily did not mention that you were on terms."

"Did I not? I suppose I forgot it," said Emily.

"By the way," said Norman, "I want to see Freshfield. I will just go in for a minute; but first, Claudia, I wish you would look at those last bands of mine; they don't do very well."

"Don't they, dear? What is the matter with them?"

"If you come into the next room I will try them on, and you can see."

Claudia understood the manœuvre, and followed him into the next room, where, instead of cambric bands, he drew from his left-hand waistcoat pocket the paper talisman which had caused that confusion of the brain, misinterpreted by the widow to her own advantage.

"I am afraid that is decisive, Norman; does it not appear so to you?"

"It is intended to be so, I have no doubt; but we

must try to overrule it. I will go to Newbury and see her myself."

"I was thinking of that. When shall you be able to go?"

"To-morrow, I hope; but, at any rate, I would not have you write till you hear from me again; and I should not like it mentioned, even to my father, till we know; in fact, not at all, unless I succeed."

"Your rhetoric is more likely to be successful than mine," replied Claudia, smiling; "nevertheless, I promise not to betray trust. What are you going to Mr. Ray about?"

"Why, to say the truth, it is chiefly to get rid of the necessity of riding back tête-à-tête with your friend; for I suppose you have no intention of going to Andover?"

"Not the least; so I cannot help you in that difficulty."

"Then I must trust to Freshfield to get me out of the scrape; for if I were to be seen riding with a marriageable lady alone, the whole town would be gossiping about it."

"But what can Freshfield do?"

"I don't know; but I dare say we shall manage it between us. I shall come in again, of course, to make my apologies;" and, so saying, he went off to the farm, while Claudia returned to the parlour.

Mrs. Heaviside did not press her invitation for that day upon Claudia quite so strongly as might have been expected, considering it was the chief purpose for which she came; but she certainly took a great deal of pains to persuade her to make a promise of paying an early visit to Andover, which Claudia could not be prevailed upon to do. In the course of conversation, Emily said to her father,—

"We went on Sunday to the New Church to hear Norman preach, and liked his sermon very much."

"Ah! I wish I could get as far," said Mr Basset.

"I must try some of these days, I think, for it would be a great pleasure to me to hear him."

"It would, indeed," observed the widow; "for my part, I was perfectly enchanted. He is, I assure you, more eloquent than Diogenes."

Emily laughed, and Mr. Basset smiled, as he replied,—

"I hope so; but, perhaps, you mean Demosthenes?"

"Very likely," said the lady; "the names are so alike, one is apt to mistake one for the other. But really I was so charmed with your son in the pulpit, that I shall give up my pew at St. John's, and attend the New Church; it does one so much good to hear an eloquent discourse. I feel quite a different being after it. Mr. Norman Basset will do a great deal of good, I am sure."

At this moment Norman himself re-appeared. He said he was going with Mr. Ray to look at a horse he thought might suit him, and that as he should return to Andover by another road, he would say "Good morning."

"Can you come back?" said Mr. Basset. "We expect Mr. Ingleby about half-past four."

"Do you, sir? I am sorry I cannot stay."

Mrs. Heaviside looked extremely blank at this unexpected disappointment, and said,—

"I thought, Mr. Basset, I should have had the pleasure of taking you home."

"You are very kind, madam, but it is impossible this morning. Permit me to thank you again for the favour already conferred. Good morning."

He then shook hands with his father, promised to see him again very soon; kissed both his sisters, and whispered to Claudia, in saying "Good-bye,"—

"I hope you will see me the day after to-morrow; but not a word till then to any one."

As soon as he was gone the widow also took her leave, not at all pleased with the turn affairs had

taken, for she was well aware that such opportunities are never neglected by men who have *intentions*; therefore it was clear Norman had no *intentions*; and the blissful vision in which she had been indulging for the last two hours, thus melted into empty air; and with it vanished the amiable smiles that had adorned her face up to the moment when she found she was to return home in solitary sadness.

"I will never go to stay with her any more," said Emily, as she saw the carriage turn the corner.

"Why not, my dear?"

"For many reasons, papa; but chiefly because, with all her affectation of sentiment and feeling, she treats that niece of hers in a most shameful manner. I would rather be the lowest servant in the house than in that poor girl's place. I would indeed."

"Poor thing!" said Claudia. "I thought that was the case when I saw her in town."

"You should have asked her to come here sometimes, Emily," said her father.

"I did, papa; but she said it was quite out of the question, and seemed absolutely afraid of my mentioning such a thing to her aunt, so I said nothing about it. Oh! by the way, I must tell you what a pretty disturbance Norman created by coming here last Friday, instead of dining with us. What, on earth, did he come for?"

"You shall hear that presently," replied Claudia. "Was Mrs. Heaviside much offended?"

"Yes, awfully. The Isherwoods were coming to dinner, and some other people in the evening. She pretended the party was given on my account, but I could find it was for Norman, and she had such a cap made for the occasion—it was wonderful to behold. If Norman had seen it, I don't know what would have become of him. Well, all the morning she was as amiable as possible, but when his note came, I saw at once that he was to have been the lion of the day, and that I was but a secondary consideration;

for she went into a dreadful ill-humour, which, as usual, she vented upon poor Alice Compton, who had the pleasure of seeing all the trimming she had been at some pains to put on the new cap torn off again, besides the delight of being violently scolded for carelessness and want of taste."

"And how did the party go off?"

"The dinner was very dull and formal. I liked the evening better; and now be so good as to tell me what mysterious errand it was that brought Norman here on Friday."

This was soon explained, and all else was for a time entirely forgotten by Emily in the interest excited by Florence Gilmour's altered circumstances.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was expected that Mr. Ingleby would reach Basingstoke by the four-o'clock-train, and it wanted but a quarter to five when Peggy put her head in at the parlour-door with a look of tribulation, and beckoned mysteriously to Mr. Ray, who had just returned from his ride with Norman.

"What now, Peggy?" he inquired.

"Maybe I'd better not tellee before the ladies, sir, it's like they might be frit."

Claudia rose from her seat in evident alarm. "If anything is the matter, Peggy, pray say so at once. Where is my father?"

"Out in the field, miss—it's nothing about he; but Dick is just come in from Basingstoke, and says as there's sad work on the railway—most all the people killed."

"Good heavens, Mr. Ingleby!" exclaimed Emily.

Freshfield went out to speak to the boy, and returned almost immediately.

"I am afraid there is an accident," he said, "but it may not be a very serious one. The boy is gone round for my grey mare, which will take me over in no time.

Do not be alarmed, Miss Basset. Let us hope there is not much mischief done."

But Claudia heard him not, for she had fainted. Emily flew to her sister and supported her in her arms, while Freshfield procured some cold water, with which he bathed her hands and forehead, but it was some minutes before she recovered sufficiently to join with Emily in urging Freshfield to go with all speed, and either to come back directly or send to let them know what really had happened, and whether any assistance could be given.

At this moment Mr. Basset came in hurriedly, and said,—

"They tell me there's an accident on the railway. I hope to God Ingleby is safe."

"I am going to see what's the matter, sir," said Freshfield, "and will get back as fast as I can."

"I had better go with you, or follow you perhaps."

"No, no, you stay here quietly, I shall go quicker by myself; it may be a false report after all. At any rate, you shall soon know the truth—here's Dick with the mare."

And so saying he nodded "adieu," and galloped off in the direction of Basingstoke.

The anxiety of those who remained behind was so great that every minute seemed an hour, especially as the view from the windows was limited by an abrupt turn in the road to the distance of about a hundred yards from the house. After the lapse of a quarter of an hour, Mr. Basset took his hat and walked out for the purpose of keeping watch at that point, but ere he reached it a carriage turned the corner, followed by Freshfield on his grey mare, and from the rapid motion of the former, as well as the joyous looks of the latter, it was clear that all was well as far as Mr. Ingleby was concerned.

"Thank God, he is safe!" said Claudia, greatly relieved, as she saw him alight from the vehicle and

shake hands with her father, apparently in high spirits, from the animation of his countenance and manner. Mr. Ray gave his horse to the boy who was waiting at the gate, and the three gentlemen walked into the house together.

"Here we are, all safe and sound," said Freshfield, "so you may call back your roses, Miss Claudia; there will be no occasion for mourning this time."

"Has there been no accident, then?" Emily asked.

"A very slight one, which occasioned some delay, but nobody is injured except the engine-driver, and he has not sustained any very serious damage."

Claudia blushed deeply as she expressed her pleasure at seeing Mr. Ingleby unhurt, for he pressed her hand so tenderly, and looked into her face so gratefully, that she suspected, not without reason, that he had been told how much she had been affected by the thought of his danger. It needed only this to bring matters to a crisis. He had been long hesitating as to whether he should or should not venture to ask "the momentous question," for men of his years are not fond of committing themselves by making an offer where its acceptance is doubtful; but with such good reason as he now had to believe he was really cared for by a young and beautiful girl, it was no wonder he should make up his mind, though it was somewhat late in the day, to take unto himself a wife. On the following day Claudia sought an opportunity of being alone with her father, and seating herself timidly by his side she put her hand in his, and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Father, would it grieve you very much to part with me?"

"Part with you, my child—why should we part? Surely we have enough to remain all together. But perhaps you are weary of this dull life and want a change. Where would you go, my love?"

"I am not weary of living here, dear father, nor

would I leave you if it would make you unhappy, for your happiness shall always be my first consideration ; but suppose there was some one who wished to take me from you—some one that you yourself esteem very highly—do you think you could be comfortable without me ?”

He looked in her face affectionately and pressed her closer to him.

“Is it Freshfield Ray, my darling?”

“No, sir; it is not Freshfield.”

“Then it must be—yes—I hope, I trust, it is one who may be to you as a father and a husband too. Is it so, Claudia?”

She smiled, and pressing her lips to his cheek whispered “Yes.”

“May heaven bless you, my beloved, my excellent daughter. This is what I would have chosen had the choice rested with me ; for all I have now on earth to wish for is to see my children happily settled before I die. Mr. Ingleby is well worthy of you, my Claudia ; and, although it would perhaps have been better had he been a younger man——”

“Not so, dear father, I would not have him different from what he is in any respect, not even in age ; for I could not love him more than I do now ; and if he were a younger man, it is very possible I might have reason to esteem him less.”

“And when am I to lose you, my love?”

“I do not know ; but it need not be very soon. And now, I have another secret to tell you, but you must not say anything about it till you are told by the right person.”

“Then I guess what it is ; I shall be asked to part with Emily too, I suppose.”

“And what should you say to it, if you were?”

Her father did not answer immediately, but at length he said,—

“It will be a trial, Claudia, to lose you both ; yet I ought to be, and am, thankful that, in giving

up the guardianship of my children, I yield it to two such men as Mr. Ingleby and Freshfield Ray."

"And then Emily will be so near you, sir, it will scarcely seem like parting with her; and I shall expect you to spend a great deal of your time with me, so you will not lose us quite. Florence, too, can live amongst us; and altogether, we shall be a very happy family party."

"I trust so, my love; God has been merciful to me in my afflictions, and if it were not for the one great sorrow, I should be more blest than in the brightest days of my prosperity."

"Let us hope that what you allude to may not always be a sorrow, dear father. Does not everything seem to prove that the event we lamented as a misfortune, was in reality a benefit? But for that, I should probably have been united to one I should soon have learned to despise, and might now have been a most miserable wife; Emily would never have known Mr. Ray, who is so good, and so eminently calculated to make her happy; and how do we know but that other blessings may flow from the same source, unpromising as it appeared, and that the sorrow you now mourn over may lead to future joy?"

"True, my child, true; I will endeavour to think so. If I could only be sure I should see him once again before I die, my heart would be at rest."

In the course of the preceding evening, Freshfield had, with some trouble, drawn from Emily a confession that he was by no means a disagreeable person in her eyes, an avowal which, of course, gave him extreme delight; but unfortunately, there was in her nature a mischievous propensity to torment her lover by exciting his jealousy, and in this spirit she had reserved one circumstance of her sojourn at Andover, until she could make it available for that unwise purpose, and an opportunity soon occurred.

It was that very pleasant hour for social converse which is usually called "between the lights," and Mr. Basset, who had taken his customary seat in an arm-chair on one side of the fire, was contemplating with pleasure the cheerful circle formed by those who might now be termed his sons and daughters, when Emily, taking advantage of an opportunity offered by the mention of Mrs. Heavyside, said,—

"Oh, Claudia, I did not tell you I met somebody I knew at the party on Friday."

"Who was that?"

"Ensign Claverton—his regiment is at Winchester—he came with the Selwyns, and wore his uniform; you cannot think how handsome he looked."

Freshfield bit his lips, put his hands in his pockets and leaned back in his chair, fixing his eyes intently on the fire.

"Ensign Claverton," repeated Mr. Basset; "who is he, Emily? I do not remember ever hearing his name before."

"He came one night to Kensington, papa."

"Ah! I remember," said her father with a sigh, for the mention of that night brought to his mind a train of melancholy recollections; and Claudia was vexed at her sister's thoughtlessness in saying anything to bring back such painful reminiscences.

"Did he remember you?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed, and declared he was delighted to meet me again. We sang duets together—he sings divinely."

Freshfield pushed his chair a little further back; he looked uncomfortable, but said nothing.

Claudia perceived his uneasiness, and in order to divert his attention from the cause of it, began to talk of Major Gilmour, and of Florence's unprotected situation; but he did not recover his spirits the whole evening, and Emily would not take the slightest pains to heal the wound she had made, being rather amused

than otherwise at the effect produced by what she called a mere trifle. Claudia, as soon as they were alone, endeavoured, but in vain, to convince her of the folly and danger of such experiments, but she only laughed, and said he had a shocking jealous temper, and she was determined to cure him of it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FLORENCE had finished her task for the day, and was walking slowly, in deep meditation towards her uncomfortable dwelling, her thoughts far away from Newbury and all its disagreeable associations, when she was startled by the sound of her own name pronounced in a voice that made her heart beat more quickly, and restored in a moment the bright crimson hue that had lately forsaken her cheeks.

“Norman!” she exclaimed joyfully, looking round as he came to her side, and, however free he might be from the vanity that so often misleads many men, he could not be wholly insensible to the evidence given in his favour by sparkling eyes, heightened colour, and visible emotion; neither did it escape his observation that, in her surprise, she had uttered his name without the formal prefix of “Mr.”—a trifle certainly; but such trifles are invaluable to a lover, since they frequently betray what he might otherwise vainly endeavour to discover.

Norman took her hand, and drew her arm through his own as he said,—

“I have been walking about here nearly an hour

watching for your coming, for I was told at your house that you would be disengaged at two o'clock, and I did not like the aspect of your hostesses well enough to wait there for you, though they invited me so to do."

"Have you then really come here, Mr. Basset, on purpose to see me?"

"Yes, Miss Gilmour, I really have; and I hope there is nothing in my doing so, to excite either your surprise or displeasure."

"Displeasure! oh, no—but I am surprised certainly. It is indeed very kind of you; but you are all much kinder to me than I have any right to expect."

"I don't know how that can well be, dear Florence. However, we will not discuss the question. I am sent here on a special mission, and I hope it will not fail, for we are all deeply interested in its success."

"I know what it is, and believe me, I am truly grateful; but it cannot be, Mr. Basset. I have written to your sister, and told her my reasons for declining an offer that, I do not deny, it would be a great happiness to accept."

"Then why should you decline it?"

"Because, I think it would be wrong to do otherwise; Claudia will explain to you my motives, and I am sure you will find them sufficient."

"But I do not find them sufficient, and that is why I am here now; for I saw Claudia yesterday, and read your letter, so you see I am fully prepared to argue the point."

Florence was silent; she felt that if he did argue the point, he was very likely to prevail, which might make her appear weak and vacillating in his eyes; therefore after a few moments' reflection, she said,—

"It is very difficult at times to reconcile our inclinations with our duty; yet in all cases where they are at variance I should wish to do that which is right; and it seems to me that my present course is

the right one. It is in that belief, Mr. Basset, and not from any motives of false pride, that I have rejected the friendly and generous proposal of your father and sisters. If I am wrong, there is no one more able to point out the error than yourself, and none, I believe, on whose judgment I can with more safety rely."

"You may always rely with perfect safety on your own," he replied, with fervent admiration in his tone and manner.

"And yet you wish me to act contrary to the dictates of my own reason; how is that?"

"Nay, not so. What I wish is, to convince you that it would be right now to alter your plans; not to show that you have been wrong hitherto, for I do not think so."

"Yet nothing has occurred that I am aware of, to change my views; and if I began upon a right plan, it must be right still to follow it."

"It is quite right, Miss Gilmour, if you prefer it to the alternative we propose to you. Tell me that is the case, and I have done. I will not even ask your reasons; and much as I may regret your decision, I will not presume to offer any further opposition to it."

"I will not say so, Mr. Basset, for it would be untrue. You cannot doubt for an instant that I should be far happier at Bridge House than anywhere else; but you know what my objections are; it is absolutely necessary that I should live in a town where I can have the opportunity of getting employment as a teacher, for I have not the means of living without it."

"You are mistaken, dear Florence; it is only your inexperience that makes you think so; the mode of living at my father's is so simple and inexpensive that you need have no scruples on that head; and—forgive me if I speak in too peremptory a tone—I will not leave you here upon any of the grounds you have yet

stated. But, perhaps, there is some other cause,' he added, as a momentary pang of jealousy shot through his heart; "perhaps I am presumptuous, Miss Gilmour, in taking upon myself to advise you, or regulate your actions; there may be some one who has a better right to do so."

"If there is, Norman," she said gently, "it must be your father, for I know of no one else who has any right at all."

He breathed freely again.

"You mentioned," he said, "in your letter to Claudia, that there is one circumstance to be told, which would throw some light on Major Gilmour's extraordinary conduct. Is it anything you can communicate to me?"

Florence hesitated; it was an unpleasant subject to speak upon, yet it might appear like affectation to refuse a confidence thus solicited: therefore, after a short pause, she replied,—

"Yes—it can be told to you; and I do not know why I should withhold it. You are aware that I have always been taught to believe I was my father's only child; but, in my last conversation with him, I learned for the first time that it is not so, and I have every reason to suppose he is gone to India to bring home a daughter for whom he appears to entertain more affection than he has ever felt towards me."

She trembled very much and could scarcely restrain her tears as she made this painful disclosure, to which Norman did not reply for some minutes, but walked on with his eyes bent to the ground as if in profound thought. How was she to interpret his silence? Had she been guilty of an impropriety in speaking openly to him of a connection that reflected disgrace on her parent, or could it be that the knowledge of a circumstance which seemed to preclude all hope of her being restored to her former position had lowered her in his estimation? Oh! no—he was far too noble and generous to be influenced by so unworthy

a consideration, and she reproached herself for the momentary injustice she had done him by such a thought, transient and involuntary as it was. At length he said,—

“In that case, Miss Gilmour, your natural home is among your nearest relatives; henceforth you must look upon them as your father and your sisters, for it is in that light they wish to be considered.”

“And in that light I always shall consider them, come what may.”

“And me, Florence?”

“As a brother—a most kind and considerate brother.”

“Is that all?”

She did not answer, for she could not, and he refrained from pursuing the question then, fearing it might give rise to further scruples regarding the acceptance of the invitation to reside at Bridge House. On that point, however, he continued to argue with increased earnestness, until at length he obtained her consent that he should come early in the following week to remove her from her present abode, to a home which, humble as it was, promised to be a happier one than she had ever yet known.

By the time this arrangement was made they had reached the gate of Cranberry Lodge, where Norman took his leave, having no desire to cultivate the friendship of the three Graces who had been eagerly watching for his return. They had been warmly debating the important question whether it would or would not be proper to invite him to tea, the younger ladies being decidedly in favour of the hospitality, which was objected to by the dame of more mature age as an impolitic measure, tending to lead the boarder into a mistaken notion that tea and toast would be afforded to her visitors “gratis.”

This prudent argument was met by a reply that she might be given to understand it was to be considered an isolated case, and by no means a general

rule; and as the greater number of votes were in favour of the motion, it was carried by a majority of one. Great therefore was the disappointment of the maiden sisters when the very handsome young man, for whose sake they had contemplated with indifference the outlay of at least fourpence for a quarter of a pound of fresh butter, vanished from before their eyes at the garden-gate; but they solaced themselves during the afternoon by making sage reflections upon the indecorum of young ladies, who were not ashamed to walk about alone with gentlemen, and suffer them to squeeze hands in open daylight, on the public highway. In spite of these inuendoes, Florence was happy, supremely happy. She knew that Norman loved her, she knew that his love was as pure and disinterested as her own, and with this blissful conviction on her mind, and the prospect before her of living amongst those who were now dearer to her than ever, it was not in the power of malice itself to cast for one moment the lightest shadow over her heart's bright hopes and expectations.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT was the close of day ; the husbandmen had brought in their cattle from the pastures, and the people were beginning to enjoy their evening recreations, when Major Gilmour entered an Indian village in the district of Allahabad on his road to the town where he expected to find the object for which he had undertaken this long and perilous journey.

On his departure from India he had left his child, not the less his in the sight of God for being born out of the pale of human laws, under the care of a vicious mother, a young Hindu girl of great beauty, but violent and vindictive passions. He had endeavoured to persuade himself that, in leaving sufficient money for the infant's maintenance, he had done all that duty required of him ; forgetting that it was also his duty to watch over the soul he had called into existence, and guard it from the pernicious influence that would surely lead to its destruction ; yet, as he pursued his journey with the determined purpose of claiming the child he had thus abandoned in its helpless infancy, no such reflections as these obtruded themselves on his mind, his conscience was not awakened to the truth, and, actuated by the same cold,

selfish feeling that had prompted him to cast off the daughter on whom his cares had been so lavishly bestowed, he now came to reclaim and take to his protection one whom he only valued as a means of carrying out his hard unnatural decree.

He was travelling with an escort of four armed natives, who carried with them all the requisites for a journey of more than five hundred miles through a country where the villages were few and far between, and the best roads nothing more than paths worn by wayfarers; and often passing through jungles or over wide uncultivated plains, where not a human habitation was to be met with for many miles. It was a time too when the fear of highway robbery and murder prevailed to a more than usual extent, for many districts were infested by bands of the daring freebooters called decoits, half soldiers, half robbers, who were ready to fight for any petty prince that would pay them for their services, but not at all scrupulous about the means of enriching themselves when there was no warfare going on. There was also another and more dangerous class of evil-doers known by the name of Thugs, whose numbers were so great as to be almost incredible, yet their existence had but recently been discovered. In almost every town and village many of these secret assassins had been living for years without exciting the least suspicion, their mode of life being the same to all appearance as that of their neighbours; and their diabolical schemes conducted with such entire secrecy that numbers of them had wives and families to whom their crimes were never known.

The Thugs were formed into societies, and each society had its own chief, who directed and controlled all its proceedings. Every one who became a member was bound at his inauguration by oaths the most solemn and fearful, not to disclose anything he should see or hear connected with the cause to which he devoted himself; and it is a sufficient proof

how well those oaths were kept that hundreds of murders were committed every year by men who were living in social intercourse with the world, and regarded as respectable members of the community to which they belonged. Who could have supposed that the merchant sitting so tranquilly in the bazaar with his goods spread out before him, talking so pleasantly with his customers during the day, and mixing with his neighbours when the hours of business were over, to smoke and chat, or listen perhaps to the entertaining stories of some wandering Faquir, who looked for his reward in the food and shelter afforded him for the night—who could have supposed that this friendly and respectable merchant was a professed robber and murderer? Yet so it often was; and the occasional absence of such men from their homes was usually accounted for by a pretence of going to distant cities to buy or sell in the way of their trade. Many a woman was thus deceived into living happily with her husband, who, had she known his true character, would have shrunk with horror from his embraces; and many a man has been lured to his doom by one whom he had associated with as a friend and neighbour. The horrible system carried on by the Thugs was founded on the religious, or, more properly speaking, the superstitious faith of the Hindus, for it is a profanation of the word religion to use it in reference to such revolting idolatry, and its votaries were taught to believe that they were under the special protection of one of the principal divinities of the country. This dread protectress was the goddess Bhowanee, whose image was anciently worshipped in some of the most magnificent temples of Hindostan. She was supposed to be the wife of Siva, the god of destruction, who, according to the legends of the Thugs, had instituted their order at some very remote period, for the express purpose of destroying human life, and thus they attempted to justify their deeds of darkness by fanatical rites and ceremonies intended to give to murder

the character of a religious sacrifice to their tutelar divinity. Their real object, however, was always plunder; and every society had spies whose business it was to discover and give information to their chief what travellers came into the villages, where they were going to, and what property they carried with them. The chief then concerted his plan to waylay the unsuspecting victims, who were usually lured to some unfrequented spot by persons who had joined them on the road, and there strangled and buried in a grave prepared beforehand, so that no blood was shed, nor any traces of the dead left to show that such a deed had been done. When men were lost in this mysterious way it was generally believed they had fallen a prey to the tigers that infested the uncultivated parts of the country, or had perished by some one of the various accidents that are likely to happen in the course of a long journey where vast tracts are uninhabited; so that Bhowanee did not want for victims until the disappearance of some British officers caused a great sensation at Calcutta, and parties of soldiers were sent out in search of them, when certain discoveries were made that led to the detection of some of those secret assassins: one of whom, on condition that his life should be spared, made a full revelation of the mysteries of Thuggism, and gave up the names of his associates, who were arrested in the villages where they dwelt, and suffered the death they merited.

Some time afterwards, Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, adopted the most active measures for the suppression of the miscreants, who, once discovered, could maintain their extraordinary constitution no longer; for many, in their terror of being seized and condemned to death, denounced those with whom they were leagued, numerous gangs were captured, many fled, most of the societies were broken up, and trials and executions were constantly going on that diminished their numbers, though they could

not altogether exterminate the wretched fanatics who dared to cover their vile practices with the semblance of a religious order.

Major Gilmour had not stayed long enough in Calcutta to hear much about these proceedings, but he was perfectly aware of the insecurity of the roads, and ere he commenced his journey, took the precaution of engaging four trusty attendants, and making arrangements only to travel by day, and to change horses and sleep at the villages. As this was not the first time he had performed the journey between Calcutta and Benares he knew how to time his progress so as to reach his destination for the night before the day had closed; and it was at rather an earlier hour than usual that he entered the village of Chundelea, and inquired for the house of the Patail or chief local magistrate, which was instantly pointed out to him.

Leaving the horses and baggage in charge of the attendants, he was walking through the principal street, when his progress was somewhat impeded by a crowd assembled round two persons, one of whom was delivering, in the language of the country, what appeared to be a religious discourse, while the other was distributing little books amongst the people who were pressing eagerly forward to receive them. The Major stopped a few moments to listen to the missionary, who was reading and explaining a portion of the Gospel of St. John, but, not feeling much interest in the scene, he was passing on, when his attention was arrested by something in the voice of the preacher that seemed not unfamiliar to his ear, and turning back to obtain a view of his features he at once recognised Charles Basset. He was greatly altered. He looked much older, his face was pale and thin, his hair hung loosely over his shoulders, and his whole appearance betokened care and suffering. Earnestly engaged in his task, he did not perceive the traveller, who, not deigning to give a second

glance, walked on with a stately step and rather a disdainful smile.

The missionary, little dreaming who was so near him, went on with his discourse, wholly intent in watching the effect it produced on his auditors, many of whom seemed deeply impressed by the words of truth that flowed with impassioned eloquence from the lips of the speaker. Never had there been in that part of the world a more zealous advocate of the Christian cause than Charles Basset; and never had missionary been more successful in spreading light among the heathens, a work that had not at that time made much progress in India, where, by similar exertions, it is now so widely diffused. Scarcely had he concluded his sermon when a young man, a native, who had been listening with fixed attention, asked for one of the little books, and being told there were none left, seemed very much distressed, and begged, with tears in his eyes, that one might be given to him. There was something so remarkable in his manner that the missionary, who had assumed the name of Villiers, told him to wait a moment, and going into his house, which was close by, he soon returned with a short tract written by himself from the text—"There shall be joy in Heaven more over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance." The Indian received it with a look of gratitude, put it into his bosom and walked hastily away.

"I must see that young man again," said Charles to his companion. "The seed has taken root there, and we must nurture its growth. Do you know who he is?"

"No," replied Mr. Baines, a reverend gentleman, much older than Charles, "I never observed him before; but he will come again, no doubt."

And he did come again, sooner than either of the gentlemen expected; for, at an early hour the next morning, Charles was awakened by a gentle

tapping at his door, which he opened instantly, and was very much surprised at seeing the young Indian standing before him, with grief and terror strongly depicted on his countenance.

“What is the matter?” he inquired, in a tone of alarm; but instead of answering the question, the young man laid his finger on his lip, and looking cautiously round, as if to see that he was not observed, went into the house and closed the door; then throwing himself on his knees he bent his head till his forehead touched the ground, while the tears rolled fast down his cheeks. The missionary bade him rise and tell what was the cause of his distress, promising with soothing words to give him all the comfort and assistance in his power, but the Indian remained prostrate before him, and began, with passionate gestures, to pour forth invectives against himself, intimating that he had been guilty of some great crime for which he desired to make atonement. Still Charles tried to encourage and tranquillise him by saying that if he had done any wrong, he was ready to hear his confession and advise him how to act; on which the Indian, whose name was Kristno, arose, and with downcast eyes and trembling frame said, partly in his own language and partly in bad English, that a traveller, an Englishman, had come to the village on the preceding evening with four servants, had slept there, and set off a little after day-break.

“They are to be murdered on their way,” he added, with increased agitation, “and it is I, miserable that I am, who have given information to those who will take their lives, of which road they are going, and that they have gold about them, for I learned these things from the men last night.”

“Wretched man!” exclaimed Charles. “What could induce you to assist in such a crime?”

“I was compelled,” was the answer; “I dared not refuse, for I am one of them. I am a Thug.”

At this word the missionary recoiled with horror,

but a moment's reflection told him that the confession was of itself a proof of repentance, and he asked the culprit why he had come to him.

Kristno replied there was yet time to save the travellers if proper means were taken ; that he knew when and where the deed was to be done, and was most anxious to prevent it.

"It must be prevented," said Charles. "I will go at once to the Patail."

"That will not do," replied the Indian, mysteriously. "He would pretend to disbelieve it, and would not assist you."

"What then can be done ? Did you hear the name of the traveller ?"

"Yes, sir,—they called him Major Gilmour."

"Merciful God !" cried Charles. "Major Gilmour ! What is to be done, man ? He must be saved ; how can I procure aid ?"

"Ah ! then he is your friend. Woe to me ! woe to me !"

"Waste no time in lamentations, but if you know how this gentleman may be rescued, say so at once."

The Indian said the only way would be to go with all speed to the English station at Secrole, and procure a party of soldiers.

"Secrole ! that's twenty miles off——"

"Yes ; but swift horses will soon carry us there. I will lead them to the spot—his grave is dug, but he shall not die."

Charles felt a cold shuddering creep through his frame, but he saw the necessity of acting with promptness and decision, therefore he desired the Indian to see about the horses, whilst he prepared for the journey.

"I dare not," said Kristno. "If I were seen they would suspect me."

"Who would suspect you ? Have you associates in this place ?"

"Yes," replied the Indian. "I must hide myself

here till you are out of the village, and come to you by stealth."

Charles, however, thought it would be a quicker and safer plan for Kristno to go at once, and for him and Mr. Baines to ride after him, as their leaving the village on horseback would excite neither wonder nor attention, and Mr. Baines might easily return unperceived on foot, whilst himself and the Indian proceeded to Secrole.

All this was speedily accomplished. Mr. Baines was aroused and briefly made acquainted with the circumstances. Kristno was dismissed with directions to wait at a certain spot; two horses were procured, and in less than half-an-hour the missionary and his strange companion were on their way to the British station.

They rode on at full speed for some miles, when the ruggedness of the path compelled them to go at a slower pace for some distance, and Kristno took this opportunity of relating a few circumstances of his own history, that not only lessened Charles Basset's repugnance to the close contact in which he found himself with a professed assassin, but made him feel a considerable degree of interest in his future destiny. The young Indian said that all he had ever known of his father was as a soldier in the service of Scindia, one of the native princes, and that he was killed in some of the petty wars that disturbed the country when he, Kristno, was a boy about seven or eight years old. Having no mother nor any other relative that he knew of, he was protected by an old man who had been his father's most intimate friend, and who adopted him as a son, treating him always with the greatest kindness and affection. This old man was, ostensibly, a shawl-merchant, and in that capacity frequently made long journeys, always taking the boy with him; but for many years he had the art to conceal his real profession, and to keep from the eyes of the child of his adoption anything that might awaken suspicion, until he had gained so com-

plete an ascendancy over his mind, that he ventured by degrees to disclose the truth, and initiate him into the doctrines and mysteries of the terrible society of which he was a member; and then Kristno first became acquainted with the fact that his father also belonged to the same order. Under the powerful influence of his protector, to whom he believed he owed a vast debt of love and gratitude, the youth was at length induced to take the oaths, and become one of the votaries of Bhowanee, or Deveen, as the goddess is sometimes called. From that time, he said, he had never enjoyed a happy moment. The crimes to which he had been accessory, the horrors he had witnessed, were continually haunting his mind, and it was nothing but fear of the vengeance of his associates that had prevented him from breaking his vows, and forsaking a cause he detested in his heart. The old man who brought him up was dead, therefore he had no tie to bind him to the association, still he had been wavering between his desire to enter upon a better course of life, and his dread of the consequences, until the previous day, when he had been determined by the discourse of the missionary, to whom, he said, he had often listened before with great interest, but never with such an entire conviction of his own sinfulness as yesterday; and it was under the influence of that feeling he had been so anxious to obtain one of the little books, as he wanted to learn whether there was any hope of being forgiven for what he had already done, if he abandoned his present course. It happened fortunately that the tract given him was on that very subject, and his resolution to do better was thus confirmed; but to avoid suspicion, he was obliged to give information to his superiors respecting Major Gilmour, and he was now most anxious to remedy the evil he had done.

This was all he had time to tell, for coming upon an open plain, they were able to urge their horses to a more rapid pace, and reached their destination without accident or further delay.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAJOR GILMOUR had departed at break of day with his four attendants, and had ridden five or six miles, when, at a place where two roads meet, he encountered three travellers, one of whom wore the Persian costume, and by the richness of his dress appeared to be a person of some importance. The others seemed of inferior rank, for although one of them was riding by his side when they first came in sight, he respectfully fell back at a sign from his superior, who addressed the major in tolerably good English, with all the courtesy of a man of high breeding, and inquired where he was going; to which the major replied with equal courtesy that the extreme point of his journey was a village some few miles to the north of Benares.

“That is fortunate,” said the Persian, “for I am on my way to Lucknow, so that our route to-day will be the same; and if you have no objection, we will join company; it will be safer for us both.”

Major Gilmour readily agreed to this proposal, and as they rode together, side by side, the stranger told him that he was chief scribe or secretary to the King of Oude, and mentioned some of the British officers

then residing at the court of that kingdom as being well known to him. He spoke familiarly of the king, talked of the unsatisfactory condition of the country, and of other matters that showed an intimate knowledge of state affairs, and of the existing relations between the kingdom of Oude and the British Government. This conversation was particularly interesting to Major Gilmour, who had been for several years stationed at Kaunpoor, and had often visited Lucknow, the King of Oude's capital, and was perfectly acquainted with the habits and manners of that court, and with some of the residents mentioned by his companion.

In the meantime their followers appeared to be in the highest good humour with each other, and were chatting and laughing together, as they rode at some distance behind their masters. About noon they halted under the pleasant shade of a cluster of palm-trees, to take some rest and refreshment, and here above an hour was loitered away ere they resumed their journey. As they proceeded, the Persian said casually, that being in haste to reach Lucknow, he intended to travel all night, and was to be met, towards the evening, by a strong escort, near the place where he and his present companion would have to separate, as their roads would then lie in different directions. On they went in the pleasantest manner possible until the day began to decline, when they entered an extensive grove of mango-trees, where they found a party of ten or twelve soldiers busied in preparing the evening meal. They saluted the Persian with profound respect, and he received the greeting with the air of one accustomed to the homage paid to men of distinction at Eastern courts.

"You have a sufficient escort here for any emergency, I should think," said the major.

"Not too great for the road I am going," replied the Persian, "which is not a very safe one. They are all well armed, and brave. But you will partake

of our repast; there will still be time to reach your resting-place before night."

Major Gilmour would rather, perhaps, have finished his day's journey without stopping, but he knew it would be considered a breach of politeness to decline the proffered civility; therefore he consented, and carpets were spread for the accommodation of the Persian and his guest, while some of the escort, with two of the major's attendants, seated themselves on the bare ground in a circle, and the rest served the viands.

These arrangements were scarcely made, when a band of soldiers, dressed in the English uniform, rushed suddenly from amongst the trees, and, in an instant, surrounded and seized the whole party, except Major Gilmour himself. Some had started to their feet, and snatched their pistols from their girdles; but they were overpowered, thrown down, and bound hand and foot. One man who had stood a little apart from the rest, darting his keen eyes around, perceived Kristno.

"Traitor!" he cried, and fired a pistol at him, but it missed its aim, and the assassin was secured before he had time to draw another.

The Persian had struggled hard with three soldiers, but was now lying on the ground with his hands behind him, and his feet bound together with a strong cord; and the major's men were also made prisoners, to their great astonishment and dismay, for the rescuers could not, in the hurry of the capture, distinguish them from the gang of ruffians it was their business to apprehend. All this was done in much less time than it takes to tell it, for it was but the work of a few seconds; and while it was going on, Major Gilmour stood bewildered and amazed, for he saw the assailants were no robbers, but British soldiers, and he could not comprehend the meaning of so extraordinary a scene. He saw, too, that he was the only one of the party

untouched, which was another incomprehensible circumstance; but before his ideas could take any definite form, an English officer, who was evidently in command of the party, came up to him, and said,—

“Major Gilmour, permit me to congratulate you on your escape from these worthy gentlemen. We have been watching their operations for the last hour or so; and look here,” he continued, taking up a piece of cloth from the ground, with a noose tied in one corner—“here is the accursed weapon that was to have put an end to all your cares in this world. Another minute, and no power on earth could have saved you, for I saw the villain at your back with this in his hand.

“In Heaven’s name! what are they?” asked the major, looking aghast.

“In Heaven’s name, nothing,” replied the officer; “but, in the devil’s name, they are Thugs.”

The whole truth now flashed in all its horror on the bewildered senses of the rescued man.

“Good God!” he exclaimed; “have I then been in the power of those wretches?”

“You have, indeed; and you may thank your lucky star that you are well out of it. Here comes the gentleman to whom you owe your safety—I may say your life; for had it not been for him, you probably would not have been in existence at this very moment.”

As he spoke, Charles Basset advanced with a smile, and put out his hand, which Major Gilmour grasped almost convulsively.

This was then his preserver—the man whom, only last night, he had avoided with coldness and contempt. But how had he become aware of his danger, and how had he been able to deliver him from it?

These and other thoughts passed rapidly and confusedly through his mind, and as he endeavoured to speak, his voice failed, and his lips quivered.

"You did not expect to find me here, sir," said Charles. "This meeting is a surprise to us both. But I thank God it has so happened, and that Providence has made me the instrument of your deliverance."

"I did not expect to see you, indeed," replied the major, who had in some degree recovered his self-possession. "It is a surprise—a very great surprise—and under such circumstances. I can scarcely comprehend them; nor do I know yet what I have to thank you for."

"Oh! I can tell you that," said the officer before mentioned—a young man of lively manners and pleasant countenance, whose name was Lacy, and who held the rank of captain in a regiment of infantry stationed at Secrole. "You have to thank him for riding twenty miles full gallop to bring me and my men here in time, to prevent these rascals from sending you to the next world by rather too quick a stage. And here's a fellow," he added, turning towards Kristno, who was standing by, "that you owe some thanks to as well; for it was he who gave Mr. Villiers information of this double-distilled plot."

"Mr. Villiers!" repeated the major, with a look of amazement. "Who is he?"

Charles smiled. "That is my name here," he said, "but I prefer that you should call me by my own."

"I fancy, gentlemen," said Captain Lacy, "that we must postpone any further explanations till I have disposed of these miscreants, whom I shall send off to Saugor at once. They will find a few of their friends in the prisons there, I believe. And now, Kristno, you must tell me the names of this Persian gentleman and his two associates, and as many of the others as you know, that I may write them down." And he took out his tablets for that purpose.

The eyes of the pretended Persian glared with

fierce hatred and revenge upon the young Indian, who trembled with a fear he could not quite overcome, although the captain repeatedly reminded him that the wretch had now no power to hurt him. However, he gave his name and those of six others, each of whom uttered a loud execration and threat of vengeance, as he heard his own pronounced.

“Very well,” said Lacy, when he had written the last name. “Now, how many more of them are there in your village, and what do they call themselves?”

Poor Kristno seemed terribly afraid of answering this question, but Captain Lacy told him he had nothing to fear, as he would certainly be protected from harm; and, satisfied with this assurance, he gave the names of three men living then in Chun-delee, which were also noted down.

In the meantime the poor fellows forming Major Gilmour’s escort, who had been frightened almost out of their senses, were set at liberty, and the prisoners removed to a short distance, and placed under a strong guard, whilst the invading party availed themselves of the plentiful repast that had been prepared for a less worthy company, which the soldiers seemed to enjoy all the more, as being the spoils of the foe.

Kristno, and two or three other Hindus, set about cooking some food for themselves, which they ate apart from the rest; but Captain Lacy sat down with his men, and, of course, Major Gilmour and Charles Basset did the same, although the former did not feel much disposed for eating. Charles now made some anxious inquiries respecting his own family, which the major took care to answer in a manner that would not lead him to suspect that the intercourse had been broken off; and he heard with great pleasure of their removal into Hampshire, and of their finding so good a friend in Mr. Ingleby, which Major Gilmour had learned from his daughter

on her return from Bridge House; but it is remarkable that in this conversation the name of Florence was never mentioned by either. Did this silence proceed from indifference, or was it an act of self-denial on the part of the once ardent lover? Perhaps it was, that he who had so resolutely broken through all social ties to devote himself to an expiatory work, felt that he still had lingering affections which, if not kept under absolute subjection, might yet have power to tempt him back to those worldly enjoyments he firmly believed it was his duty to resign for ever.

When the soldiers had finished their meal, the fragments were given to such of the prisoners as chose to eat anything, but most of them sullenly refused; and now it remained to be considered whether it would be advisable to set up tents, of which there were several among the baggage of the robbers, and pass the night on the spot; or make use of the remaining hour of daylight, to get as far from it as possible; and as nobody seemed to have any particular fancy for the place, the latter plan was decided upon. The prisoners were first sent off, tied two and two together, and well guarded, to Benares, whence they were to be forwarded to Saugor, a city of the interior, appointed as the place of trial for all criminals of that description.

"I must ride after those worthies," said Captain Lacy, "though I don't much like travelling in such company, and I shall be very glad, Major Gilmour, if you will go with me and spend a few days at our quarters. You will find a pleasant set of fellows there, and I dare say some of our officers are not unknown to you."

"Colonel Evans is an old friend of mine," said the major, "and I shall be glad to meet him again; but I would rather finish the business that brought me here first, and will take Benares in my way back. What is Mr. Basset going to do?"

Charles said he wished to return as quickly as possible to his own residence.

“Well then,” said Lacy, “you cannot do better than take with you half a dozen of my men that I shall send with Kristno here, to secure the three rascals that belong to this gang; that will make your road pretty safe.”

Charles was very glad to take advantage of this offer, and prepared instantly to depart, having already received an assurance from the major that he should visit Chundelea on his return.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WITH strange and mingled feelings Major Gilmour pursued his way, an altered man, although he knew it not. Left once more to himself, he had full leisure to reflect on all that had occurred; and shuddering at the thought of the horrible fate from which he had been so miraculously preserved, his proud heart was humbled, and he could not stifle the sense of his own unworthiness to receive so great a benefit at the hands of him who had rendered it. His anxiety with regard to the child was very much cooled, and once or twice he felt half disposed to turn back without accomplishing the object of his journey; but some undefined feeling, akin to shame, prevented him from doing so, and he continued his route with wavering and uncertain purpose; and again sleeping at one of the villages, he arrived at his destination on the following day. It was certainly a relief to his mind to learn that the infant had died soon after he quitted India, and that the mother had then disappeared from the place, and had not since been heard of. The old man of whom he made the inquiries hinted that the woman had destroyed her child for the sake of the money left for its maintenance, and the painful conviction

was thus forced on the mind of the erring father that he had himself probably been accessory to the murder of his own offspring by leaving it in the charge of such a woman. Here, then, was another subject for serious reflection, and in his present frame of mind it was not without good fruits; but those fruits were still only in the bud, and he was wholly unconscious of their existence.

It was only about six hours' journey from the place where he had received this intelligence, to Secrole, the British military station of Benares, and thither he next directed his course. He was most cordially welcomed, and congratulated on his escape by all the officers of the regiment, amongst whom he spent three or four days very pleasantly, and then he heard from Captain Lacy the particulars of the nefarious plot that had been so happily frustrated. It appeared that the pretended Persian was the chief of a gang of assassins, who were distributed in three different villages, and held constant communication with each other. There were five or six of them in Chundeleë, and Kristno was the one always employed to discover the intended route of any travellers that came there, and whether they carried sufficient property with them to make it worth while to waylay them; for, notwithstanding the mystic rites and doctrines of Bhowanee's devotees, the end and aim of all their proceedings was invariably plunder.

On the night Major Gilmour arrived at Chundeleë, Kristno was desired by one of his fraternity to find out where he was going and how many people he would have with him. This information was easily obtained from his attendants, and one of the robbers set off instantly to the next village to give notice to his chief, who laid his plans accordingly. What those plans were has been already seen; but there was one circumstance mentioned by Captain Lacy which gave the major a shock he could not easily get over. It was that, when they had all separated on

that eventful evening, Lacy was shown a place which the soldiers had discovered, where five graves were dug in readiness to receive the bodies of the destined victims, so surely had the miscreants calculated on the success of their stratagem.

"That Mr. Villiers seems a good sort of fellow," said Lacy; "I suppose you are well acquainted with him."

"I knew him in England," replied the major, "but I was not aware he was in this country till he came so providentially to my rescue."

"So he told me. I have heard he is doing an immense deal of good here, and the conversion of that poor fellow, Kristno, seems to be a proof of it. If I were inclined to be a fatalist, I could see in all this sufficient ground for a belief that he was sent here for the express purpose of working out your deliverance, which would hardly have been achieved had not his eloquence enlightened the mind of this poor Indian, so far as to give him courage to break through the trammels that surrounded him."

"There may be something more than chance in it, indeed," replied the major, thoughtfully; and several times that day the same idea recurred to his mind, bringing with it a vague suspicion that his own conduct had been far from blameless, and that all these circumstances might have been ordered to convince him of his injustice.

After spending nearly a week in the British cantonments, Major Gilmour returned to Chundelea, where he was received by Charles Basset with a cordiality that was almost painful to him, feeling as he did that he had so little claim to such friendly treatment, and he now had leisure to observe the extraordinary change that so short a time had made in him. The gay, thoughtless, volatile young man he had so lately known, was now a calm, sedate personage, blending the dignity of an apostle with the humble bearing of a devoted Christian. The emotions that had been awakened in his bosom by this unexpected

meeting with one whose presence could not fail to revive many tender recollections were now wholly subdued; and he addressed the major with a serenity which showed how effectually he had conquered all those worldly passions that might have interfered with the task he had assigned to himself on earth. His voice was firm, his countenance placid, and his whole demeanour that of a man undisturbed by agitating thoughts; yet there was nothing of the austerity of an ascetic in his manner; nor did the interior of his dwelling exhibit any signs of indifference with regard to personal comfort. In answer to Major Gilmour's warm and reiterated expressions of gratitude he said,—

“They are not due to me, but to a higher power, whose agent I am; and in this we both have reason to be thankful—you, for life preserved; I, for being appointed the instrument of your preservation, for I firmly believe it is a token that my atonement has been accepted.”

“It may be so, Mr. Basset; still you have done me a service that I can never repay, and I should be glad to acknowledge it in any way that may be most agreeable or beneficial to you, if you will only point out to me what I can do——”

“For me, personally, nothing,” replied Charles; “but if you wish to show your sense of God's mercy in this instance, you cannot do it in a more fitting manner than by aiding the work we have here in hand. Any assistance of that kind will be most welcome, and Mr. Baines, my colleague, will tell you how it may best be afforded.”

“But surely you do not intend to live in banishment for ever? you will return to England after a time, and then——”

“No, sir,” said Charles, interrupting him, with a melancholy smile; “no; my mission is here—tell my father I am happy—tell him——”

“Write to him, Mr. Basset; nothing will give him

so much comfort as a letter from yourself. And now, may I ask why you have never communicated with any of your family."

"Because I was afraid of being tempted to abandon the work I had entered upon; for it was no easy task, Major Gilmour, to break the ties of home and kindred, and give up my whole soul to the one great cause. I thank God that I have been strengthened to do all this, and that my labours hitherto have been successful."

"It is a satisfaction to you, no doubt; but have you not done enough for the atonement you speak of, and do you not think that some consideration is due to your family? I am assured that all your friends desire you should return to them, and it strikes me that the duties you have taken upon yourself here do not altogether release you from those you owe at least to your father. I wish I could prevail upon you to go back with me."

Charles shook his head, and sighed deeply.

"I must not be tempted," he answered. "Our Great Master has said that 'No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.' I have vowed myself to this service, and if I were now to abandon the work, all that I have done, all that I have intended to do, would be counted as nothing."

"I will not pretend to argue points of conscience with you, and, perhaps, you may be right in following the dictates of your own. However, you will write I hope; that can surely be infringing no religious duty, but rather performing one."

After a few moments' reflection, Charles said he would write to his father; and as his guest meant to leave the village early on the following morning, he spent great part of the night in the performance of this task, at once both painful and pleasing. The letter was a very long one, and gave a circumstantial account of his proceedings from the time he left

home up to the present hour. From this it appeared that, from the day of his mother's death, his thoughts had been directed towards the course he had adopted, and having some knowledge of Mr. Baines, a missionary, who was then in London, he stated his views to that gentleman, who entered warmly into them, and gave him all the assistance in his power. In consequence of the many conversations they held together, Charles was induced to adopt the opinions and principles of the Baptists, and was regularly received as a member of that community.

Mr. Baines was at that time on the point of undertaking a mission to India, and was about to sail in a few weeks with two other gentlemen who were engaged in the same cause, and through his influence the Committee of the Missionary Society, taking into consideration the peculiar circumstances of the case, agreed to accept the services of Charles as an assistant, without the usual training, and accordingly furnished him with the means of going out with Mr. Baines and his colleagues, under whose instruction he made considerable progress during the voyage, in the study of the Hindostanee and Sanscrit languages, in which they were all three well versed. Immediately on their arrival, Mr. Baines and himself proceeded to Chundelea, where the former had been before, and where they obtained leave to prosecute their labours, and to build the house in which they now resided. He then spoke of the success with which his own efforts for the conversion of the heathen had been attended, and related the incidents of Kristno's repentance and Major Gilmour's consequent preservation, as among the blessed effects of his endeavours to spread the light of truth among the Gentiles.

The rest of the letter, although written in terms of unabated affection towards his father, his brother, and his sisters, was calm and unimpassioned. It contained not a word of regret at his separation from them, nor a single expression that could be construed

into a wish to revisit his native land ; yet he sighed as he folded the long epistle, and hastily dashed away the tears that rushed to his eyes as his hand traced the word "England," in writing the superscription. The departure of Major Gilmour on the following day was another trial of his fortitude.

The major had held a long conversation with Mr. Baines, who was a very well-informed, gentlemanly man, on the subject of affording pecuniary aid to the mission, which it was agreed should be done through the society in London ; and with regard to the Hindu Kristno, whom he was anxious to reward for his good offices, Mr. Baines said it was the poor fellow's desire to be taken into the English service as a sepoy, and he had no doubt he would be received as soon as the trials were over, for his acquittal was certain, as Mr. Basset intended to give such evidence in his favour as would exempt him even from the usual penalty of imprisonment awarded in general to those who gave information against their partners in guilt, with a view of saving themselves from an ignominious death. The major had also deposited in the hands of Mr. Baines a sum of money to be employed for the benefit of the young Indian, and said that if, at any future time, an opportunity should occur of advancing his interest in any way, he should always be ready to give his aid for that purpose.

When the time for his departure arrived, Major Gilmour once more expressed his sense of the obligation he was under, and his regret at leaving his preserver behind him.

"And now, Mr. Charles," he said, "where are your letters for England?"

It was long since the exile had been called by that name, once so familiar to his ear, and he started at the sound as if it had been a voice from the dead. His hand trembled as he put the packet into that of the major, who perceived that his usual calmness had for the moment deserted him ; but it was only for the

moment—he speedily regained his wonted composure, and said, without any apparent emotion,—

“If you should see my father, Major Gilmour, assure him that I am well and happy.”

“Is that all I am to say, Mr. Basset? nothing more consolatory than that? no word of hope that you may some day return——?”

“I have said all in that,” replied Charles, pointing to the packet. “He will, I think, be satisfied.”

“I very much doubt it; nevertheless, it is a matter that rests entirely between you and your own conscience, and I can only hope that your life will be a long and happy one, wherever and in whatever manner it may be passed.”

Charles now ventured to inquire whether Miss Gilmour was at Calcutta; and there was something in the tone of the major’s brief reply that led him to ask if he was right in still calling her Miss Gilmour.

“She is not married; but, as I came on business that was not likely to detain me long in this country, I did not bring her with me.”

And this was all that passed on the subject. Both the missionaries accompanied Major Gilmour some few miles on his journey, and when they parted, Mr. Baines said he hoped they should soon meet again, as he should probably be in England in the course of the following year; but Charles Basset did not utter a single word expressive either of hope or regret, and maintained to the last moment that firm, composed demeanour, which could only have been acquired by a degree of self-command that was truly extraordinary.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE winter had passed away, and the spring had returned with all its bright promise of summer joys, of warmth and verdure, of calm blue skies, of rosy-tinted mornings and golden sunsets, of balmy evenings and moonlight walks, of all that is loveliest in a world that is full of beauties for those who, loving and beloved, are disposed to look for and enjoy them. Claudia was now a happy bride. Her marriage had taken place soon after Christmas, and the first few weeks of her wedded life were spent in Paris; but, as soon as the gay season of that gayest of all capitals was over, she returned to London, and was happily installed as the mistress of her fond husband's handsome establishment. Mrs. Garnet, the quondam housekeeper, had betaken herself to the domicile of another bachelor, who, being ten years in advance of Mr. Ingleby, was more likely to maintain his freedom, although the good lady was heard to express a touching sentiment to the effect that after the delinquency of her late master, she would never put faith in mankind again; and to that declaration she had added an appendix, the substance of which was, that if Mr. Ingleby had set his mind upon being married, she

thought a more matronly person would have been better suited to a man of his time of life. Mr. Basset had found it a severe trial to part with his favourite daughter, whose quiet, gentle cares were so soothing to his broken spirit; for, although Emily was not less affectionate, her liveliness did not so well accord with the general tone of his feelings. It is true he liked to see her merry, and would not on any account have checked her gaiety by saying a word of its depressing influence at times upon himself; and so little did she suspect this of being the case, that frequently, when he appeared in lower spirits than usual, she would try to cheer him by the very means that had a directly contrary effect; for the human heart can only vibrate to such sounds as harmonize with it. The inefficiency of Emily to supply to her father the place of the absent Claudia was perceived by Florence Gilmour, who, without seeming to observe it, contrived gradually to accustom him to look to her for those minor attentions that were so necessary to his comfort. He was not so able now to walk about out of doors, or amuse himself in the house, as he had been before the winter; his eyesight was failing, so that it was an effort to read for half an hour at a time; but Florence would sit by him with unwearied patience, and read aloud or converse on any topic that she thought would be pleasing to him. It was remarkable that one of these was the progress of missionary labours in the East Indies, a subject to which he had scarcely ever given a thought, until his attention was awakened to it by a letter signed "Villiers" in one of the periodicals, to which allusion has already been made. Other articles by the same writer had subsequently appeared, and he had perused them with the deepest interest, not knowing why, but always feeling pleasure in so doing. Sometimes when Florence asked what she should read to him, he would say, "Read me one of Villiers' letters, my dear; I like to hear those letters, though I know

them pretty well by heart now I think." What could it be that had taken such an extraordinary possession of his fancy? Is there a link in nature, that, by some electrical power unknown to us, connects the souls of those who are far distant from each other? Otherwise, how was it that these missionary papers always seemed associated in the mind of the bereaved father, with thoughts of his long-lost son, yet without the most remote idea that Charles and Villiers were one and the same person? It might be there was some peculiarity in the form of expression that touched the associating chain, as sometimes we find that a word, a tone, or even a look, will bring back vividly the remembrance of some event long past, yet may vainly attempt to trace the connection between them.

Norman spent as much of his time as he possibly could spare from the numerous duties of his vocation at Bridge House. It was now known to everybody that he was Miss Gilmour's accepted lover, and the report of his projected marriage had reached the ears of the rector, who asked him whether it was true; and when he acknowledged the fact the worthy gentleman shook his head, as if he rather doubted the wisdom of such a proceeding.

"My good young friend," he said, "have you considered whether you have the means of maintaining a wife?" to which Norman replied that his views were in accordance with his resources.

"Ah! yes, that is all very well to say; but you must remember that there may be others by-and-bye to keep besides the wife; for that is pretty sure to be the case when there is nothing to keep them upon—I have always remarked that."

"I must trust to Providence, sir, as many have done before me," said Norman, with a smile.

"Aye, and starved upon it. I fancy the only thing to trust to for bread and cheese is money; but you are in love, I suppose; and it is of very little use I

know to argue upon plain matters of fact with a lover; so, when is this foolish affair to take place?"

"Not till the autumn, I believe."

"Well, the longer you put it off, the better; has it been a long engagement?"

Norman had been wishing for an opportunity of stating all the circumstances of his engagement to Mr. Robertson, of whose kindly feelings towards him he had received many gratifying proofs, and this seemed a favourable time for such a communication, being the social hour between dinner and tea, when there was nothing to do but to sit over the wine and talk. It had become an established custom for Norman to dine at the rectory on a Sunday, and Mr. Robertson would as soon have thought of sitting down to dinner without his wife as without his curate. There were usually several other guests, but on this particular day the only stranger present was a lady who had retired to the drawing-room with Mrs. Robertson, leaving the two gentlemen to themselves, and Norman profited by the occasion to enter into a full detail of Florence Gilmour's history, in which the good clergyman soon found himself very much interested. Of course he told the whole story to his wife, who was very much interested too, and so they agreed between them that the curate's salary should be increased on his marriage; and this liberal intention was made known to him forthwith, and acknowledged with much gratitude. He had endeavoured to prevail on Florence to fix an earlier period for their marriage, but she had determined to await the expiration of one year from the time of her father's departure.

"We cannot foresee what circumstances may arise," she said. "He may yet return; and how much happier we both should be, dear Norman, if our union were sanctioned by his consent!"

This was an argument Norman felt he ought not to oppose, still he could not help wishing in his secret

heart, that the major might not return till Florence was his own by sacred rights, that would put it beyond the power of even parental authority to separate them.

In the meantime a great revolution had taken place at Andover. Mrs. Heaviside had discovered that the heart of Norman Basset was not attainable, or, more correctly speaking, that it was disposed of elsewhere, consequently her friendship for Emily had considerably cooled, and invitations were no longer given. The cessation of that intimacy was a considerable relief to the mind of Freshfield Ray; for Emily, notwithstanding her resolution to the contrary, had continued to visit Mrs. Heaviside occasionally, and never missed the opportunity, on her return, of entertaining her lover with encomiums on the manifold attractions of Ensign Claverton, who was a frequent visitor at the house of the fair widow. Now the laudation of the gallant ensign was a theme that could scarcely be very agreeable to the ears of Mr. Ray, who was not only doomed to listen to the praises of that gentleman, uttered by lips that ought not to have spoken thus admiringly of any one except himself, but was also compelled to hear of the assiduous attentions paid to Emily, by the young officer, whose name he positively hated. Sometimes he ventured to remonstrate; but this was sure to give rise to a quarrel, which always ended, as such quarrels usually do, in the submission of the lover, whether right or wrong. Under these circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that Freshfield should rejoice in any event that had the effect of terminating an intimacy so destructive to his peace.

The case was this. A report had for some time been prevalent at Andover, that Mrs. Heaviside was about once more to enter into the "holy estate of matrimony," and in confirmation of this rumour, it was publicly declared at every tea-table throughout the town, that a very handsome, fashionably-dressed

young man, a stranger to the Andoverites, but supposed to be a person of consequence, was frequently at the widow's house, and that she had spoken mysteriously of sending an order to Paris for certain articles of millinery, and of a probability, in case of some events likely to occur, of visiting the French capital herself at no very distant period. She had not been seen at Bridge House for several weeks, when, one morning, to the infinite surprise of Emily Basset, a most unexpected visitor appeared in the form of Alice Compton, whose face was all radiant with joy, and whose voice and manner had in them more of animation than Emily had believed her to be capable of displaying. She had been frequently asked to spend a day with the Bassets, but her aunt had always found some pretext for postponing the acceptance of the invitation, evidently with the intention of preventing the visit altogether; therefore Emily supposed that, owing to some caprice of Mrs. Heaviside, her niece had at length obtained permission to come, and she attributed to that cause the unwonted signs of delight that sparkled in the eyes and lighted up the homely features of Alice Compton.

"Dear Alice, I am so glad to see you! How did you come?"

"I walked all the way, Miss Emily, for I was in such a hurry to tell you some news, that I could not wait for a conveyance I might have had to-morrow."

"It is good news, I am sure, by your looks; but take off your bonnet, and have a glass of wine, before you begin to tell it, for you must be very tired."

And as she spoke, with true country hospitality she produced from a cupboard a decanter of wine, and a large cake of her own manufacture, which had been pronounced excellent by Freshfield Ray.

Mr. Basset and Florence, who had been walking in

the garden, now came in, and both kindly welcomed the unexpected visitor, especially the former, who was always benevolently disposed towards those whom he considered to be in any way oppressed.

"Alice has brought some news, papa," said Emily, "and I am dying to hear it."

"It can hardly be worth dying about, my dear; but what is it, Miss Compton? Is your aunt married?"

"No, sir, she's not married yet; but the news concerns myself, not her; and I thought Miss Emily would like to hear it."

"I shall indeed, Alice, if it is any good fortune that has happened to you."

"It is better fortune than I expected ever to meet with. My father is come back, and I shall have a home of my own."

"Your father! I have always understood your father was not living."

"I did not know he was alive till yesterday. He has been abroad a great many years, and no one knew anything about him. You may think what a joyful surprise it was; and just at this time too, when my aunt is going to be married, and I should have had no home at all."

"No home! my dear," echoed Mr. Basset indignantly. "Was she going to turn you out of her house, then?"

"I was to look out for a situation, sir; but, thank Heaven! I shall have no occasion to do so now."

"And your father, my dear; where has he come from, and how is it you have never heard of him before?"

"Yes, do tell us all about it," said Emily; "you cannot imagine how delighted I am!"

Just at this moment, the door was opened and Freshfield walked into the room. He started, and appeared a little confused at seeing Alice, who blushed the deepest crimson as he approached and shook

hands with her. Emily beheld these tokens of recognition with evident amazement, for she had believed they were total strangers to each other, yet she saw them meet as old friends, and it was now her turn to be jealous.

"I was not aware that you were acquainted with Miss Compton," she said to Freshfield, in a tone which plainly expressed, "What right had you, sir, to keep this matter a secret?"

"Miss Compton and I have met before," replied Freshfield, "but I did not know whether I ought to mention it without her permission."

"I will tell Miss Emily about it myself, Mr. Ray; but I have other things to speak of first, and I am very glad that you are here to hear them."

Freshfield took a seat by the side of Emily, and listened with great interest whilst Alice gave a brief account of the events that had so completely changed the whole current of her existence.

"I suppose you know," she said, "that my aunt is going to be married?"

"We have heard so," replied Mr. Basset, "but nobody seems to know who the intended husband is."

"I am afraid she does not rightly know that herself, sir; she calls him Captain Romer, and says he is heir to some great nobleman, but I cannot help thinking he is deceiving her, for if he really was heir to a nobleman, he would hardly marry a woman of her age."

At the name of Captain Romer, Emily and Florence exchanged looks of intelligence, but nothing was said, and Alice proceeded.

"My aunt has not known this gentleman many weeks, and I have not the least idea how she first met with him, for he seems to be quite a stranger at Andover, so of course I was very much surprised when she told me about ten days ago that she was going to be married, and that I must look out for a situation, as

she could not have me with her any longer. I scarcely knew what kind of situation to look for, or how to set about looking for it; but Miss Simpson, the dressmaker, very kindly offered to take me as an assistant till I could hear of something, and I was going to her yesterday if I had not been prevented by the happy chance that has given me a much better home than I have ever had in my life. My aunt has always led me to believe that my father, who was her own brother, had died in America when I was quite a child; but this was not the truth, and she knew it was not."

"What could be her motive for concealing the truth?" said Mr. Basset.

"I do not know, sir; but whatever the motive might be, I cannot help feeling that it was very cruel to do so. However, the happiness of finding him again is all the greater from being unexpected."

"But how did he find you out?" said Emily; "and where did you first meet?"

"He had no difficulty in finding my aunt," replied Alice; "he came to her house yesterday morning, and she knew him directly, although it is nearly twenty years since he left England. He married again in America, but his wife and children are dead, so he has only me now to care for, and I am sure we shall be very happy together."

"Well, I suppose Mrs. Heaviside was glad to see her brother again?" said Mr. Basset.

Alice replied that she thought her aunt would have been better pleased if her father had remained abroad, as they had never been on very friendly terms; and she did not expect there would be much intercourse between them.

She then related, with much simplicity and good feeling, some of the particulars of her first interview with her father, and ended her story by saying that he had purchased a cottage in his native village, which was not more than four miles distant from

Bridge House, but as it would not be ready for two or three weeks, he was going to take her to London, to see, as she termed it, a little pleasure.

This simple story was listened to with great interest by her auditors, who congratulated her most sincerely on the pleasant change in her affairs, and it was wonderful how complete an alteration it had made in herself. She looked full ten years younger than she did before, and almost pretty from the very pleasing expression of her now animated countenance.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE marriage of Lord Merrington, which was duly announced in all the London papers, had produced a very unpleasant effect on the affairs of Captain Romer, who had obtained considerable sums of money from various sources, on the strength of those expectations, which were now at least doubtful. His patrimony was gone, the instant demands upon him were urgent, and he found it more difficult to raise funds for his immediate necessities, than he had done whilst the money-lending world believed in the certainty of his future inheritance; nor was his case by any means desperate, so long as there was no rival claimant; but at length the astounding fact was published that the Lady of Brianscourt had presented her noble lord with a son and heir, and Captain Romer then found it convenient to leave town, having already fixed upon Andover as a place of temporary sojourn, should the expected offspring of his uncle's union be a boy. It was not without thought or without reason that he had selected that town as his place of refuge, for he had met by chance with the Irish artist, whose attractions had proved insufficient to move the obdurate widow to compassion, and from

that unlucky votary of Cupid, he had caught an idea that Andover contained a rich prize, which, in the present state of his affairs, might be worth trying for. The artist, who was not very well informed as to the real amount of Mrs. Heaviside's property, had magnified it in his conversation to a considerable extent, whereby Captain Romer was deluded into a belief that her possessions were much greater than they really were, and under this impression he appeared at the town above mentioned, where, by means of a little arrangement with one of the young men at the circulating library, he soon found an opportunity of introducing himself to the lady, who was a subscriber to that establishment, and in the constant habit of going there to select food for her mind in the shape of new novels.

Romer loitered away two whole mornings without success, but on the third she came, the shopman gave him a hint, and he commenced his operations by venturing to make some remarks on a work she was inquiring for. This opening being well received, he made a still further advance, aided by his ally the shopman, who mentioned a certain book as worthy of her perusal, but added that the only copy they had was out, and they should not have another for some days, on which Romer, with affected diffidence, said that he had himself a copy of the identical work, and if the lady would condescend to accept the loan of it, he would leave it at the library for her. This was rather a bold stroke, but it answered very well, for the shopman had taken care to address him respectfully as Captain Romer. She blushed, and smiled, and granted the permission desired; then, after the exchange of a few more compliments, allowed him to hand her into her carriage. As soon as she was gone the shopman untied a parcel of new books, and taking out a fresh copy of the one in question, Romer paid for the reading, and received the assurance of his coadjutor that it should be sent to the widow before

the library ticket was put into it. The acquaintance once commenced, its improvement was easy, as no disinclination was manifested on the part of the lady, who was in fact delighted with so romantic an adventure, especially as the hero was the happy proprietor of black moustaches, which, united with other graces, rendered him even more eligible than the handsome curate himself. The birth of Lord Merrington's heir was unknown to Mrs. Heaviside, as indeed were all other circumstances relating to that nobleman, whom she had always heard spoken of as a single man, therefore Romer found no difficulty in persuading her that his own claim to the title was still good ; and on making his proposal, just seven days after the first interview at the library, was unhesitatingly accepted.

So far all was well ; but as he was fearful that, if the affair was noised abroad, some kind friend might give the lady an intimation of the true state of his circumstances, he prevailed on her to consent to a secret marriage, pretending that his uncle had some one else in view for him, and thus he avoided the shackles of marriage-settlements, his grand object being to obtain entire control over the property of this silly and imprudent woman.

The attractions of Norman Basset being thus cast into the shade, Bridge House ceased to be a paradise, and Emily was no longer an angel. Mrs. Heaviside's interest in the family melted suddenly away, like a lump of sugar in a cup of hot tea, leaving no trace behind but its frothiness.

The next preliminary step was to get rid of her niece, as it was agreed between herself and her impatient lover that immediately after their nuptials, which were to be celebrated with as little delay as possible, they should proceed to Paris, where she intended to engage a French maid, consequently would have no further need of the services of Alice Compton. The notice to quit was given in a very

abrupt, unfeeling manner, and when Alice ventured to intimate that it would be a difficult matter to find a situation in so short a time as was allowed her, the amiable lady replied, that if she could do nothing better she must take a nurse-maid's place; she had been a burthen to her friends long enough.

With this pleasant alternative in view, Miss Compton began to make her little preparations for removing to the house of the laundress till she could hear of a situation that she might be able to undertake, when she was sent for by a dressmaker in the town, who knowing that she was a clever needlewoman, offered to give her employment till she could find something better, and to this proposition she readily and thankfully agreed. The day for her departure had arrived, her box was packed, and her aunt had given her a single sovereign as a parting gift, the first she had ever had to call her own; and with this magnificent donation she was to be sent forth, friendless and forlorn, to begin the world on her own account. She was not unhappy, for she left nothing behind her to regret; still there was something depressing in the idea of having from that time no settled home, which brought tears into her eyes as she said to herself, "I wonder what will become of me?" The question was more speedily resolved than she could have imagined it would be, for scarcely had it crossed her mind, when she was told a gentleman desired to see her.

"A gentleman—who is he? Did he not give his name?"

"No, Miss Compton," replied the servant, "he said it was no use sending his name, for you would not know him; but he wished to see you particularly; so I showed him into the dining-room."

Alice went down stairs wondering who the stranger might be, and what he could possibly want with her. He was rather a coarse-looking man, rough in his manners, but very well-dressed, and by no means

vulgar, though not what would be called a gentleman.

"Are you Alice Compton?" was his first question.

"Yes, sir—that is my name."

"And you live here with your aunt, Mrs. Heavyside?"

"Yes, I do, at present."

"Have you always lived with her?"

"Almost ever since I can remember; that is, from the time my mother died, when I was about nine years old."

"And has she treated you kindly? Are you comfortable here?"

Alice hesitated, for she hardly knew whether it was right to answer such questions from a perfect stranger without knowing what his motives were in asking them. At length she said,—“I am going to leave my aunt, and am in want of a situation; perhaps that is what you have called about, sir?” for it now struck her that this might be the business on which her strange visitant had come.

"Why are you going to leave?" he inquired; "and what sort of a situation do you want?"

These queries seemed to confirm Alice in her last opinion, and she answered,—“My aunt is going abroad for a time, I believe, and does not find it convenient to take me with her; therefore I should be glad of any situation where I could be useful, either to wait upon ladies, or do needlework, or——”

"Stop—that's quite enough," interrupted the stranger, "so that's what she's going to do with you, is it? But she may be—I won't say what. Do you know anything of your father?"

"My father, sir! would to Heaven I did! but I am afraid he is not living."

"Oh! yes, he is; I dare say you would like to see him, wouldn't you?"

"Merciful goodness! Is my father really alive, and

shall I ever see him again? Oh! what a happiness it would be!"

"Would it, my dear; and should you recollect him, do you think?"

"No!" replied Alice, "I was so young when he went away;" then a sudden light breaking in upon her, she clasped her hands and looking earnestly at him, said in a voice trembling with agitation, "Surely, surely, you are not he?"

"Yes, I am though; I am Tom Compton, and you are my daughter; so I hope you will like me, my dear; and I dare say we shall do very well together; for I have nobody but you now belonging to me in the world except my sister, whom I don't care that for;" and he snapped his fingers with a vast deal of emphasis.

Alice, with a natural burst of joy threw herself into the arms of her father, who, rough as he was in speech, could not help shedding tears as he embraced her with all the warmth of parental affection.

Her arms were still entwined round his neck, and she was sobbing on his shoulder, when Mrs. Heaviside, quite unconscious of what was going forward, opened the door, and stood petrified with amazement, at the unexpected scene that presented itself to her eyes.

"Well, sister Heaviside," said Mr. Compton, putting his daughter from him, "here I am, you see, come to thank you for all your favours, especially your goodness to my child."

"Thomas!" exclaimed the lady in a tone of dismay! "Bless me! who would have expected to see you in England."

"Why, not you, I dare say; but it seems I have turned up just at the right time for my poor girl here; she shall not be sent out to service, I can promise you."

Mrs. Heaviside, not being prepared for such a meeting, and feeling totally at a loss for the moment

what to say or do, threw herself upon a couch, and went into hysterics by way of gaining time. She was disagreeably surprised by what she considered the ill-timed appearance of so inelegant a relative; for, in addition to the mortification of introducing such a person to her polite and fashionable lover, there was the awkwardness of having forgotten to account for eight hundred pounds, that had been sent to her as a provision for the little Alice, very soon after the death of her mother.

Mr. Compton, who had not been remarkable for steadiness of conduct in his younger days, had, in consequence of pecuniary difficulties, when Alice was about five years of age, betaken himself to America, unincumbered with wife or child, but with a vague idea of sending for them as soon as he had made his fortune. He had managed to carry out with him a sufficient sum to enter upon a new career, and this he invested in the purchase of some shares in a steam-vessel, which proved a fortunate speculation; but as he continued the old habit of spending his money as fast or faster than he made it, he never found himself in a condition to put in practice his laudable intentions with regard to those he had left behind him, and at the end of four years from the time of his quitting the mother country, he received intelligence from his sister that he was a widower.

Not long after this he married the only daughter of a tobacco-planter in one of the American States, and it was then he remitted eight hundred pounds to Mrs. Heaviside, in trust for Alice, thus making his mind easy on her account.

He had two children born in America, and succeeded his father-in-law as owner of the plantation; but in course of time he was left a lone man by the death of his wife and children, and then his heart began to yearn for his native land. He sold the plantation, and returned to England in easy circum-

stances, and with more wisdom than he had taken away with him. His first care was to find out his daughter, and, with that view, he went to Staffordshire, where he learned that Mrs. Heaviside was now a widow, and also gained sufficient information about the manner in which his daughter had been brought up and treated by her aunt, to excite his utmost indignation.

The brother and sister had never been very fond of each other, and these circumstances were not calculated to inspire more amicable feelings on either side; consequently, after a most unpleasant scene of recrimination, Mr. Compton took his daughter away with him to the inn, where he proposed staying for a few days, to make some arrangements about the cottage that was to be their future residence.

It was a new era in the life of Alice Compton; a bright gleam of sunshine first breaking on her hitherto cheerless path; and she walked with a light step and lighter heart, looking forward hopefully to social joys that had never yet fallen to her lot.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NEARLY a month had elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapter. The late Mrs. Heaviside, now Mrs. Romer, was enjoying the blissful days of her second honeymoon at Paris, and the Comptons were quietly settled in their pretty cottage at Wellton. Alice, as mistress of her father's house, felt like a queen, and regarded her little domain in the light of a splendid empire ; all was so new, so delightful, and her father, who really possessed many good qualities, soon became excessively fond of her. She was a frequent visitor at Bridge House, where she constantly met with Freshfield Ray, who sometimes paid her more attention than Emily thought there was any necessity for, considering she was now the sole heiress of a man of independent property. The little mystery that hung over their first meeting had been cleared up by Alice herself, who, seeing how the case stood between Emily and Mr. Ray, took the earliest opportunity of explaining how it happened that the gentleman was not a stranger to her.

It appeared that when Mrs. Heaviside first came to reside at Andover, the most popular hero of the day was the Hampshire giant, who had lately succeeded

to his father's wealth, and was, of course, an object of high admiration and esteem, as every man must naturally be similarly circumstanced in any provincial town of merry England, where such stars but seldom shine.

The widow had given several parties, for the express purpose of inviting him to her house, and on those occasions had distinguished him by the most flattering attentions, which, however, he received with perfect indifference, evincing no disposition to profit by the preference shown him. He had even been very polite to Alice Compton in her aunt's presence, whereby he had given great offence, so that the lady grew cool towards him, and the bonds of amity thus weakened were at length suddenly burst asunder by the following incident.

One evening Alice was making tea in a separate apartment, and sending it into the drawing-room to the company, when the man, who acted as waiter, answered in a very insolent manner to some directions she was giving him. Mr. Ray, who had just arrived, happened to walk into the room at the moment, and hearing what the man said, desired him to beg Miss Compton's pardon, which he refused to do, saying he could do no more than that if she were a lady. Being highly provoked at this answer, Freshfield threatened to knock him down, unless he made a proper apology, on which, the culprit, being rather in fear of so powerful a champion, was about to offer some excuse, when Mrs. Heaviside came into the room, and inquired what was the matter?

Freshfield, burning with indignation, told her what had passed, on which she tossed her head, begging that he would not interfere with her domestic affairs; when the servant, presuming on the support thus given by his mistress, declared he would make no apology at all, as Miss Compton had spoken to him in a manner he would not put up with; and, so saying, he left the room.

Mrs. Heaviside vented much spleen on Alice, and told Mr. Ray she considered it unbecoming a gentleman to quarrel with her footman, on which he bade her good evening, and left the house, where he had never been since.

When Alice related this circumstance to Emily, the latter asked her why she had never mentioned it before.

“Because,” said Alice, “as you and my aunt were friends, I did not like to tell you anything that might prejudice you against her.”

“But you might have told me, Alice, that you knew Mr. Ray.”

“I could scarcely tell you that, Miss Emily, without telling you the whole particulars of our very slight acquaintance,” replied Alice; but the blush that suffused her cheeks as she spoke awakened a suspicion in Emily’s mind that the conduct of Freshfield on that occasion had made a deeper impression than she cared to own; yet, as the circumstance occurred before Freshfield and herself had ever met, she could not reasonably feel any jealousy about it.

The departure of Mrs. Heaviside from Andover, and the cessation of her intimacy with the Bassets, afforded great relief to the mind of Mr. Ray, who trusted that he should never hear anything more of Ensign Claverton, but he trusted in vain, for the young officer, having little else to do, found it a pleasant way of passing time to flirt with his former friend’s pretty sister, and was not disposed to give up that amusement so long as his regiment remained at Winchester, and he began to think that, as he had once been introduced at the house of Mr. Basset, he had a very fair plea for paying his respects to that gentleman at his present abode. If he had known that Emily was seriously engaged he certainly would not have contemplated any such visit, for, however gay and thoughtless he might be, he was by

no means unprincipled, nor would he have done anything so dishonourable as to interfere with the claims of an affianced husband.

Emily was quite aware that he had no serious views with regard to herself, for he made no scruple of lamenting to her that his scanty means condemned him to a single life; and this it was that made her think there was no harm in giving encouragement to attentions that meant nothing; but it is a dangerous theory, and, if acted upon, is sure to be attended with regret.

It happened one Saturday evening that Alice Compton, being at Bridge House, stayed rather later than usual, and as it was growing dark, Mr. Ray offered to walk home with her, and his escort was accepted.

"I shall come in as I return, just to wish you good night," he said to Emily; but he did not come in, and she was told the next morning that it was past twelve o'clock when he reached home—a piece of intelligence that caused her to determine not to bestow a single smile upon him the whole day.

It was his usual custom to walk with the Bassets to church, but on this unlucky Sunday morning he suffered them to go without him, nor did he make his appearance until the service had commenced, when he seated himself in another pew. Now all this might have been easily accounted for if Emily had waited patiently till he could have found an opportunity of explaining it, but she was offended at his apparent neglect, which she attributed to a cause very remote from the right one, and took the most imprudent means of revenging herself that she could possibly have adopted. Freshfield had scarcely taken his seat when there was another late arrival, and the newcomer placed himself directly opposite Emily Basset, who, on raising her eyes, encountered those of Ensign Claverton, which were fixed upon her with an earnest gaze that did not escape the observation of

her lover, who had no difficulty in recognising his fancied rival by the full military uniform, which made him a conspicuous object in a village church, and was attracting the admiration of the simple rustics.

Mr. Ray was not much edified by the discourse he heard that day, and when it was ended, instead of hastening to join his friends at the church-door, he lingered behind, anxious to see what kind of reception the young officer would meet with, and again his behaviour was misconstrued into a wilful slight. The ensign, unconscious of the mischief he was doing, addressed himself with the utmost ease to Mr. Basset, who received him very kindly in consideration of his having been one of Charles's associates; he then paid his compliments to Miss Gilmour, whom he perfectly well recollected having seen before; and, these ceremonies duly performed, he took up his position by the side of Emily just as Mr. Ray emerged from the church-porch, and approached the group with slow step and clouded brow.

"We have been waiting for you, Freshfield," said Mr. Basset. "This is Ensign Claverton, whose name I think you have heard before."

Freshfield bowed coldly.

"Ensign Claverton, Mr. Ray."

The young soldier returned the cold salutation, and offering his arm to Emily, who accepted it with evident pleasure, he whispered, "Surely Hercules is come upon earth again!" at which she laughed merrily, and her ill-timed mirth of course added another shade to the already dark cloud that obscured the visage of her offended lover; who gave his arm to Florence, while Mr. Basset walked on the other side of Emily, and in this order they proceeded to Bridge House. The distance was about half a mile, and there was a field to cross, and there were two stiles to get over; but Emily, instead of availing herself as usual of Mr. Ray's assistance, accepted the aid of

Claverton, thus adding to the mortification she had already given.

Such circumstances may be trivial in themselves, but they are not so as regards their effects, for the sum of social life is not made up of great events; and true happiness depends far more on trifles than on the weightier affairs of existence. It remains with us to convert them into gems and flowers that make our life's short journey bright and sweet; or into the burning sands and poisoned darts that scorch and wound at every step. Mr. Basset invited Claverton to lunch, and Emily seconded the invitation, on which Freshfield, bowing slightly to the whole party, with a hasty "Good morning," addressed to no one in particular, walked away towards the farm.

"What is the matter with Freshfield, Emily?" said Mr. Basset.

"I'm sure I don't know, papa."

"You have offended him, I suppose, my dear; or he has offended you—which is it?"

"Neither, that I know of."

"Perhaps you know, Miss Gilmour, as you walked home with him?"

"No, indeed, sir; Emily ought to know best."

This little dialogue was sufficient to open the eyes of the ensign, who, in the absence of the young ladies, contrived to learn from Mr. Basset that a serious engagement actually subsisted between Emily and the Hercules, whose rights he had so unwittingly invaded; and, to his honour be it spoken, he instantly saw the propriety of withdrawing his own unmeaning attentions.

The absence of Freshfield, who did not come again all that day, occasioned more uneasiness to Emily than she would confess, and as the evening advanced and he still did not appear, Mr. Basset, who was so much accustomed to his society that he felt greatly at a loss without it, said he would go and see what had become of him.

As soon as he was gone, Florence said to Emily,—

“I am afraid, dear Emily, Mr. Ray is seriously displeased—indeed, you have done very wrong.”

“He deserves it. Why did he not come back last night; and why did he keep away from us this morning?”

“Last night he saw Alice’s father for the first time, and was induced to stay and sup with him. This morning an accident happened to one of his horses, which detained him till it was too late to go with us to church, and he did not like to disturb us by coming into our pew after the service had commenced; so you see his offences are not very great after all.”

“Nor did I say a word to him about it; he chose to keep back till Mr. Claverton had offered me his arm; that was not my fault.”

“Oh! Emily, this is childish; you know very well it was not the mere fact of your taking Mr. Claverton’s arm, it was your manner altogether, and he was very much hurt at it. Believe me, dear Emily, you are acting imprudently, and, forgive me, if I say ungenerously, for Mr. Ray is highly deserving of your confidence, as well as your affection. He loves you sincerely, but he also respects himself, and I would advise you to consider that it is as possible to lose a heart as to win it.”

“A heart that may be so easily lost is hardly worth the trouble of keeping.”

“That is a great mistake, Emmy, depend upon it; if it is worth having, it is worth preserving.”

“What would you have me do then—send a humble petition to Mr. Ray, praying that he will restore to me the light of his smiles?”

“No; but I would have you pay more regard to his feelings, and not affect—for I believe it is affectation—to take pleasure in having other admirers besides himself.”

“Oh! nonsense; it is the only way to keep him from growing too vain.”

“He is not a man likely to grow vain, and I fear you are preparing sorrow for yourself, dear Emily, and this it is that makes me so uneasy, for I am quite sure that if Mr. Ray were to say ‘Emily, it is best that we should part,’ you would bitterly regret having given him so much cause.”

“Not at all. If he thinks proper to withdraw himself for no greater reason than I have given him, I shall be quite indifferent about it: but he cannot, Florence—he would be miserable—far more miserable than it is in his power to make me.”

“It would make him unhappy for a time, no doubt; but I can see that he has a great deal of firmness, and if once he should make up his mind that you are not suited to each other, and that it would be best to separate, I think he would act upon that conviction at any sacrifice.”

“And do you think a word would not recall him?” said Emily, laughing.

“Why should you try the experiment, dear; suppose it should fail?”

“Fail, indeed! you little know how much in love he is.”

“Yes, I do know; and I know that your influence over him is great, so long as it is exercised with a right view; but it is not great enough to blind his judgment, nor ought it to be; for a man is infinitely more worthy of respect who is capable of acting independently of any other influence than his own reason. Mr. Ray is capable of this, and I would have you consider well before you put him to the proof.”

“My goodness! what an excellent wife you will be for a clergyman, Florence; I declare I do think you could write his sermons for him if he should happen to be pressed for time.”

“You are making a jest of a serious matter, Emily;

I wish to open your eyes to your own danger, and save you from future sorrow."

"But I really do not see what I have done to bring down this terrible lecture upon my devoted head."

"Not much in reality, certainly, for I believe you cared as little about meeting with that young man this morning as I did; but you made a show of caring about it; you looked as if you triumphed in his attention, and appeared utterly regardless of giving pain to one whom you ought to treat with the consideration due to your future husband. You have no more right to encourage such attentions now, Emily, than if you were already married; and do you think that your conduct this morning was such as would have been pleasing to a husband?"

"It is a very different thing; when we are married he will have a right to look black if any other gentleman should happen to be over polite, but I will not admit his right now."

Here the conversation was interrupted by the return of Mr. Basset, who said that Freshfield was not at home. "But I suppose we shall see him presently," he added. "It is very strange he should have gone out without looking in here first."

The evening wore heavily away, as it generally does when somebody who is anxiously expected does not come, and at last ten o'clock, the signal for retiring to rest, having struck, all hopes of seeing him that night were at an end.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Soon after breakfast the next morning, Freshfield came, not with his usual light step and joyous countenance, but looking pale and dejected, his heavy eyes showing that he had passed a restless night. Emily was alone, busily engaged, or pretending to be so, in putting fresh ribbons on her bonnet, and as she was sitting with her back towards the door she affected not to observe his entrance, although she knew very well that he was in the room. He walked to the window and stood there for a minute or two without speaking, whilst Emily, resolved not to be the first to break the silence, went on with what she was doing without taking any notice of him. At length he went up to her and holding out his hand, said,—

“Emily, are we friends?”

Her head was bent down over her work, so that she either did not or would not see the offered hand, and without raising her eyes, answered carelessly,—

“Really, Mr. Ray, you must be as well informed on that subject as I am.”

Deeply hurt at her indifference, he turned again to the window, and another interval of silence followed

of longer duration than before, and if Emily could then have read all that was passing in her lover's mind she would probably have acted a wiser part than she did, but her evil genius certainly prevailed that day, tempting her to throw away her heart's dearest treasure for the momentary indulgence of childish pique. Several minutes had elapsed, when Freshfield again approached, and seated himself by her side. His voice trembled a little, but he spoke calmly, and in a determined tone.

"Miss Emily Basset, I must and will have an understanding with you. Is it, or is it not your desire that the engagement between us should be at an end? If that is your wish say so candidly, and I will release you from it at once and bear my disappointment with as much fortitude as I can; but do not trifle with me, Emily; do not insult me by your open preference for others, for, though I may not have been fortunate enough to win your esteem, I cannot submit to be treated with contempt."

"The contempt is a creation of your own fancy, Mr. Ray; and perhaps I am not far wrong in supposing you may have a motive for seeking this quarrel."

"What motive, Emily?" he asked quietly.

"Oh! sir, you know best; Miss Compton can sing your praises for half an hour together, and you can favour her with higher compliments than you ever vouchsafe to bestow upon me."

"What have I said, Miss Emily?"

"Only that she is the most amiable person you ever knew, and would make the best wife in the world."

"I said one of the most amiable persons—and one of the best wives—nor will I unsay a single word of what I said; for I do believe her to be a most amiable and estimable person, and that the man she marries will be a happy man, if he has sense to appreciate her good qualities."

This was spoken with some warmth, for the speaker was really angry at the implied suspicion, and could not help resenting so flagrant an injustice towards both himself and the unoffending Alice; but his reply was little calculated to restore peace, for Emily was not in a frame of mind to see either her own conduct or his in a right light, and it only had the effect of urging on the mischievous spirit that possessed her to try his powers of endurance to the utmost. She therefore answered with provoking irony,—

“It would indeed be a pity that such surpassing excellence should be underrated when there is at least one who can estimate it at its highest value.”

“It would be a pity, and I dare say it will be properly estimated; but why should we speak of Miss Compton, Emily? what has she to do with the question between us?”

“A great deal, sir. You thought proper to say that I insulted you with my undisguised preference for others; now I certainly might retort the observation if I cared enough about it to do so.”

“If you cared!” he repeated indignantly, at the same time rising and pacing the room with uncontrollable agitation; “if you cared—then why have you deceived me. Why have you suffered me to believe that you ever did care for me, and led me on to trust all my happiness to the truth of that belief?”

“I did not tell you to trust all your happiness to it.”

“At least you have taught me the folly of doing so now, and I trust it is not yet too late to profit by the lesson.”

Emily held up her bonnet, as if she was admiring its new trimming, and began to hum a lively tune. This was too much for the already lacerated feelings of the noble-hearted young man, who, darting upon her a look in which reproach, anger, sorrow, and

wounded pride were all blended, he left the room and the house, without uttering another word.

“He must be taught a little more humility,” said Emily to herself as soon as he was gone; still she did not feel quite at ease, and half wished she had not suffered him to depart under his present impression of her indifference.

Freshfield went home with a heavy heart, and a firm purpose to break the tie, dear as it was to him, that boded so little peace for the future, and he spent the whole of that miserable day—the most miserable he had ever experienced during the whole course of his life—in forming his plans and writing a farewell letter to her he had loved so fondly. It cost him many painful efforts, and once or twice his resolution wavered, so that he threw aside the pen, and murmured,—

“I cannot do it;” but his better judgment came to his aid, and he finished the hard task he had imposed on himself.

His letter contained not one reproachful word; it was manly, kind, and even tender. He spoke with great feeling of the unhappiness of a marriage without mutual love and implicit confidence; he lamented his own deficiency in those brilliant attractions that he perceived were requisite to gain her heart; expressed the deepest interest in her future fate, and ended by saying that whomsoever she might honour with her preference, he hoped she would meet with a return as ardent and sincere as his own would have proved had it been his happy lot to win her regard. This being finished and sealed, he turned his thoughts towards such other measures as were necessary for the accomplishment of the purpose he had in view.

“Yes,” he said, “I must go; for if I remain here, I might be tempted to do that which I should perhaps regret all my life. It is better that we should part now, and for ever; she never would be happy with a man like me, therefore it will be better for us to

I must be all to her, or nothing. All, it is plain I am not; and, bitter as is the alternative, I will submit to it, rather than run the risk of sacrificing the peace of my whole future life. A year or two of absence will banish the remembrance of this unfortunate attachment, and save me from the wretchedness of finding myself united to a woman who does not love me."

With such reflections as these, he made all the needful preparations for his departure early on the following day, so that it was long past midnight before he retired to rest.

In the meantime Emily had been revolving in her mind how she should receive him when he came again; for that he would come again before the day was over, she did not for an instant doubt.

"Where is Freshfield this evening?" said Norman, who had been at Bridge House all the afternoon, but did not notice his absence until it was getting late.

"I believe I have offended the gentleman," replied Emily, "and so he chooses to sulk by himself."

Norman shook his head, and looked grave.

"I am afraid, Emily, you are not acting very wisely; Freshfield is a very good fellow, but you had better mind what you are about."

She laughed, and pretended to treat the matter lightly, but it was easy to see that his prolonged absence caused her more anxiety than she would confess, and when she bade Florence "Good night," she said,—

"I suppose I must set this foolish affair to rights to-morrow."

"I wish you had done so to-day, love; but, better late than never."

The morning came, and hour after hour wore away, yet Freshfield did not appear. Emily tried to be gay, but it was a useless effort; her eyes were constantly turned to the window, and her ears were bent to catch any distant sound that might indicate his approach. She looked and listened in vain, for he was many

miles away, and his voice of gladness and his looks of love, in which her heart had delighted, were now among the bright things of the past. At length came the messenger of evil tidings, and the letter he had left with directions that it should be delivered at a certain hour, was brought to her. She opened it with a merry laugh, saying, "Oh! he is coming round at last;" but, as she read, her smile vanished, her colour faded, and, quitting the room abruptly, she flew to her own apartment, where Florence soon afterwards found her in tears.

"What is the matter, Emily?"

She made no reply, but put the letter into the hand of her friend, who read it with sincere sorrow, for she saw at once that the writer was in earnest, and that, unless an immediate reconciliation could be effected, Emily would never be the wife of Mr. Ray.

"You must answer this at once, Emily; you must own yourself in the wrong."

"I will not," she answered passionately. "He has chosen to desert me for a mere trifle, and he may go."

"It is not a trifle, dearest. Oh! Emily, that is where your mistake has been; nothing is a trifle that lessens the confidence of a lover, and, if you have any regard for Mr. Ray, you will endeavour to restore it."

"How? What would you have me do?"

"I would have you write to him frankly and kindly; he fancies he does not possess your affection. Do not leave him in that error, for it is one that is fatal to your peace as well as his own."

"I cannot humble myself so far, Florence. I would rather never see him again than make such a concession."

"Then I am afraid it is probable you will never see him again, if that is your determination. Let me beg of you to think better of it, Emily, and avert the evil while it is in your power to do so."

After some further arguments to the same effect, Emily agreed that Norman should act as mediator, and go to Mr. Ray in the evening to offer some explanation with regard to the unfortunate affair of the Sunday, which had occasioned all this mischief; but ere the evening arrived, Emily learned that her lover was gone, no one knew whither, and that the farm was to be occupied by a stranger.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"CLAUDIA," said Mr. Ingleby, one day after dinner, "I met an old friend of yours in the city this morning."

"Did you, dear? Who was that?"

"Sir William Ferndale; I had not seen him before, since I committed the folly of getting married, so, of course, he had to say all manner of civil things about it."

Mrs. Ingleby laughed, and so did her husband.

"I hope," she said, "you did not tell him you had found out it was a folly."

"No, no, I kept that snug to myself. But I was going to tell you, we had a long talk together, and I was sorry to hear but a very indifferent account of his son."

"Of Frank? Why, what's the matter, is he ill?"

"No; it has nothing to do with his health, and I really don't know why I should say I am sorry, for he must be a most unprincipled fellow, and richly deserves all he has met with. He was actually married, Claudia, before his engagement with you was broken off."

"Married, George! impossible!"

"It is true, nevertheless. He was entrapped, it seems, into a marriage while he was in France, with a woman who passed herself off for an Italian countess, but turned out, as might have been expected, a person of very doubtful reputation, who had been an actress. He brought her here to London, where she

was soon recognised, and of course not admitted into any respectable society, and the wretched dupe of a husband was ashamed to show his face upon circuit or anywhere else."

"What has become of him, then?" said Claudia, who was very much shocked at this account of one whom she had once regarded as her own future husband.

"He has done what many men do in desperate circumstances—gone off to Australia."

"And his wife?"

"She is here, acting at one of the minor theatres, and is constantly annoying poor Sir William, who looks like the shadow of his former self, so thin and careworn. He told me all this with tears in his eyes, poor fellow! I asked him to come and see us."

"Did you, dear? That was kind; I am glad of it. So poor Frank is gone to Australia. I do really pity him; for I think his faults proceeded more from weakness than want of principle."

"A weak man, Claudia, is almost sure to become an unprincipled one, even if he is not so to begin with. It wants firmness of character to act always with a strict regard to honour and probity, for there are, unfortunately, plenty of temptations to do otherwise; but there was something worse than mere weakness about young Ferndale—there was a selfishness and coldness of heart that was hardly natural at his age; he had not a spark of the generous, noble spirit we look for in so young a man; old fellows like me are apt to grow cold and cautious, for we have had enough experience of the world to make us so; but a man at five and twenty should have more liberal feelings."

"Experience has not quenched your liberal feelings, dear George, I am sure."

"There now—I gave you a fine opportunity of paying me a compliment, and you missed it."

"I was afraid of making you conceited, or I should

have said, you were not yet entitled to claim the privileges that belong to old fellows."

"The compliment you did pay me, love, was a better one, for it was sincere. I wonder we have not heard from your father lately; we must go down there soon, I think, and see how they are all getting on."

"I should be very glad if you could; I am afraid from Norman's last letter that my father's health is breaking very fast. Oh! George, if we could but hear anything of Charles——"

"Why, he would be happier, no doubt; but I do not think it has much to do with his declining state of health, for I was talking about him the other day, to your old medical man at Kensington, Mr. Saunders, a very clever man he is by the way, and he says there are causes likely to produce gradual decay, totally independent of mental anxiety. I was glad to hear him say so, because, in case of the worst, it might hereafter be a consolation to your brother to know that such was the case."

"It might indeed; and God grant he may return before my dear father is taken from us. It is now more than a twelvemonth since he went away; is it not strange we should never have heard a single word of him in all that time?"

"Yes, it is; I hardly know what to think of it."

At this moment a servant came in with a letter on a silver tray, which he handed to his master.

"For me, James, is it—by post?"

"No, sir; a man left it, he looked like a porter."

"Did he say where he came from?"

"No, sir; he only asked if that was right."

"I wish, James, you would always ask where people come from; you know I have told you that before."

"Yes, sir."

"Then mind you remember in future."

"I will, sir," replied James, as he had invariably replied before to the same injunction, and as he would, in all probability, reply again, as there was not the most remote chance that the wish thus mildly

expressed by his master would dwell in his remembrance one instant after he had closed the dining-room door.

"Now who is this from, I wonder?" said Mr. Ingleby, as he broke the seal. "It looks like Ray's handwriting,—and it is too; a long letter from Freshfield Ray."

"I hope nothing is the matter," said Claudia, watching with some anxiety her husband's serious looks as he read the first few lines. "What is it, George? Is my father worse?"

"No, dear—nothing of that kind; but here's a pretty piece of business; it is all off between your sister and young Ray; she has been playing fast and loose with him, I suppose, till she has tired him out."

"I am not at all surprised at it," said Claudia; "but extremely sorry. What does he say? I hope it is nothing but what may be arranged."

"I doubt it; for he seems quite in earnest: however, I will read you the letter, and you shall judge for yourself."

"DEAR SIR,

"My mind has been, and still is, so painfully excited by the unhappy occurrences of the last few days, that, although I am now in London, I feel quite incapable of paying you a visit, and must trust to your goodness to believe that it is neither from want of friendship, nor from any consciousness of wrongdoing, that I leave town again without seeing you. I have left Hampshire, probably for a considerable time—perhaps for ever; but I trust my motives will bear the strictest investigation, and that not the slightest imputation will rest on my honour or sincerity in all that I have hitherto professed, for I am now acting under a firm conviction that the course I have adopted is the right one, and that which is best for my own peace, and also for the future happiness of her whose happiness will ever be dear to me, though fate has decreed that mine shall not be shared with her. When I offered myself to Miss Emily Basset I

had reason to believe that I was honoured with so much of her regard and esteem as might give me confidence to hope that I should win the first place in her affections, for with that only could I be contented, and her acceptance of my offer I looked upon as a confirmation of those hopes. But I was deceived; I find it requires more shining qualities than I possess to gain that love without which married life would be a life of wretchedness; therefore nothing remains for me but to withdraw my pretensions, and seek, in change of scene, to lose the remembrance of that short-lived dream of happiness which has left me for the present a miserable man. I cannot bear to remain within sight of the wreck of all my fondly-cherished hopes, therefore I shall give the charge of the farm to Benson's brother, who is a steady fellow, and one that I can trust. I have no doubt he would take it for a term of years, but that will be an after consideration, as I cannot tell how I may feel in a year or two about returning to it; and I am not willing to give up the home where I was born and where I hoped to pass all my days. I propose going first to Dublin, then to Cork, and afterwards making a tour through the western and northern provinces of Ireland and the Highlands of Scotland. This will occupy the summer and autumn, and I think of spending the winter either at Edinburgh or Paris. Beyond this I cannot say. If I should not return to Hill Farm, Benson can be either your tenant or mine as you please, but I hope that one year's absence may enable me to overcome this ill-fated attachment, for it does not follow that one dark cloud is to overshadow the whole of a man's existence, and when this has passed away I may again be able to enjoy life as I did before it came between me and my sunshine. I have written to Mr. Basset and to Norman, as I thought an explanation was due to both, although I believe Emily will be candid enough to clear me from the reproach of fickleness or dishonourable conduct. Give my sincere regards to Mrs. Ingleby, and tell her

that I rely on her accustomed goodness to judge of me kindly. Would to Heaven such happiness as yours had fallen to my lot, I should have known how to prize it; but it was not to be, and I must bear the disappointment. And now, my very excellent friend, I bid you a long farewell, trusting, however, that we shall meet again with the same cordiality as heretofore, till when, believe me yours with the truest esteem,

“FRESHFIELD RAY.”

Claudia was so much affected at this letter that she could not help shedding tears, for she knew that Freshfield felt all that he expressed; and she believed too that Emily, whatever follies she might have been guilty of, was sincerely attached to him, and would be very unhappy.

“Well, what do you think of it, my dear?” said Mr. Ingleby.

“I am afraid it is all over, indeed,” Claudia replied; “and yet I know that Emily likes him much better than she does any one else.”

“Then why has she been so silly as to make him think otherwise?”

“From mere coquetry. I have often cautioned her against it, and so has Florence, for we both have been afraid it would come to this at last; Norman, too, has often talked to her very seriously.”

“It is a great pity,” said Mr. Ingleby; “she has lost as worthy a fellow as ever lived in the world. I do not know a better young man in every respect than Freshfield Ray, nor one who is more truly a gentleman in point of feeling. I am very sorry; very sorry, indeed, for it is a loss to us all. However, there is nothing to be done; we cannot solicit a man’s return in such a case; so the thing must be left to chance; and the chance is, that, before he comes back he will have met with somebody else who will know better how to value the heart of such a man than your foolish sister.”

CHAPTER XL.

FOR several weeks after the departure of Freshfield Ray, Emily clung to the vain hope that he would return, or at least that he would write to her again and give her an opportunity of replying to his letter, for she could not believe that he really meant this parting to be final, yet the time passed on, and she neither saw nor heard from him. Every footstep made her start and tremble, every time the postman came to the gate her heart throbbed with an emotion she could not suppress, and each fresh disappointment was followed by that sickness of the soul which all have felt who have indulged in visions of happiness never to be realised. With each succeeding day hope grew still fainter, till at length it deserted her altogether; she lost her spirits, her colour fled, and the least word spoken either more gently or more roughly than usual would bring tears into her eyes. Florence did all she could to cheer her by constant endeavours to draw her attention to other subjects than the all-engrossing one that occupied her thoughts; but these attempts, instead of having the desired effect, were unjustly attributed to a want of feeling for her sorrows, and this impression caused her to refrain from speaking of them, so that Florence believed her efforts were

in some degree successful. Mr. Basset never mentioned the name of Freshfield Ray, or alluded to him in any way, for, notwithstanding his explanation and Emily's desire to exculpate him by taking all the blame on herself, her father thought he had not behaved well, and, on first being made acquainted with what had occurred, said it was a second edition of Frank Ferndale, nor would he listen to any excuse for, or palliation of, Freshfield's conduct, for he saw that his child was unhappy, and felt angry with him who was the cause of that unhappiness; but Norman was more just, and if he spoke of the absentee at all, it was in a friendly manner, but this was not often, for he thought it best to say very little about him.

The only person to whom Emily could unburthen her heart, and look for such consolation as was most pleasing to her, was Alice Compton, into whose sympathising bosom she could pour all her grievances without restraint, for Alice liked to talk of Freshfield Ray, whom she believed to be the perfection of human kind, and Emily liked to hear her speak in his praise, so that it was a theme of which neither of them ever grew weary. Sometimes, too, Alice would speak hopefully of the happy changes often wrought by time, and however little foundation there seemed to be for such bright hopes, they were very delightful for the listener to hear, and for the moment to dwell upon. She candidly confessed to Alice the feelings of jealousy that had prompted her to be guilty of the folly that had led to consequences she so little anticipated, and now so bitterly lamented.

"Oh! if he had but known," she said, "how truly I loved him, and how little I thought of any one else in comparison with him; he would not have deserted me thus; but how was he to know it when I did everything to make him think otherwise? How very, very foolish I have been!"

Such conversations as these were a great relief to her mind, so that she frequently took a walk to the

cottage, but Alice did not often return the visit, being now entirely occupied with her own household affairs, which afforded her inexpressible delight, both from their novelty and the importance they gave her. Meanwhile the time fixed for the marriage of Norman and Florence was drawing near, and as it approached poor Emily felt more melancholy than ever, for it had been settled, before the unfortunate disagreement between her and her betrothed, that the two weddings should take place on the same day ; it was now, therefore, a painful subject, and Florence, aware that it must naturally be so, avoided as much as possible making any allusion to it.

Thus the days, and weeks, and months glided on till the summer had begun to give place to the richer but less vivid beauties of the autumn, and preparations for the bridal could no longer be delayed.

Norman had taken a small house close to his church, and Mrs. Robertson, with all the interest that kind-hearted matrons generally feel in the affairs of young people under such circumstances, had superintended the furnishing and arrangement of it, which services were very acceptable both to Florence and Norman, who had indeed much cause for gratitude, as the kind lady did not forget to send in at her own cost many an elegant trifle which the young couple could not have afforded, and which, to use her own expression, when Norman ventured once to remonstrate as not knowing whether he was to be answerable for some piece of extravagance, was "neither here nor there."

Now all this was very pleasant, and everything seemed progressing admirably. Mrs. Robertson had called on Florence at Bridge House, and Florence had been to the rectory, where her reception had been such as was extremely gratifying to Norman, who hoped that the rector's lady would prove to her a valuable friend, and also an agreeable companion, notwithstanding the disparity of their ages, for there

are many cases where youth and age may associate with mutual advantage.

Emily still continued her visits at the cottage, where all that cheerless summer she had found her best solace, till about three weeks before the time appointed for the celebration of the marriage, when she observed a marked change in the manner of her friend, who behaved to her, if not with coldness, at least with a degree of reserve she was quite at a loss to account for. Instead of speaking freely and kindly as usual on the subject that always engrossed at least two-thirds of their conversation, she appeared desirous of avoiding it, coloured whenever the name of Mr. Ray was mentioned, and gave confused answers to all that was said about him. Emily was surprised, she felt uneasy, still she took no notice, thinking it might perhaps be only fancy, and that the next time she went it would not be so; but again and again it was the same, and at last she asked Alice what was the meaning of so strange an alteration.

“I did not know I was altered,” she replied.

“But you are altered, Alice, and there must be some reason for it; you do not care to talk of Freshfield as you used to do, and when I mention his name you do not look me in the face. Why is it?”

“Well, perhaps it would be better if we were not to talk of him quite so much, Emily, it can answer no good purpose, and it would be wiser if you were to try to forget him.”

“Perhaps it would,” said Emily, pettishly, “and as you think so, I shall certainly in future keep my thoughts to myself, for I see that nobody feels anything for me.”

“You are mistaken, everybody feels a great deal for you; but we cannot make circumstances different from what they are; and, in short, Emily, it would be better that neither of us should speak of Mr. Ray to each other again.”

“Then, Miss Compton,” said Emily rising, with

flushed cheeks, and tearful eyes, "if that is your opinion, and you will give no explanation of such a sudden and extraordinary change in your sentiments and your behaviour to me altogether, we can no longer be friends, for you must have some very powerful motive that you do not choose to acquaint me with."

"I am sorry you should be offended, Miss Emily; but, whatever my motives may be, I am not singular in my opinion, for I know that your brother and Miss Gilmour both think the same."

"They have thought so from the first, but it is only just now that you have adopted those ideas, and you cannot wonder that I should be surprised. Do not mistake me, Alice; do not suppose I cannot live without talking of Mr. Ray; but I have given you my whole confidence; I have told you what I would not have breathed to any one besides, and should not to you if I could have foreseen this, or had not believed you to be a sincere friend."

"I could not foresee it myself," said Alice quietly, "and I am your sincere friend."

"That remains to be proved," said Emily, tying on her bonnet.

"Are you not going to stay to tea, Miss Emily?"

"No, I thank you, it is too far to walk after tea now that the days are so short. Good afternoon, Alice;" and she gave her hand rather coolly.

Alice said "Good-bye," and so they parted; Emily resolving within herself not to go near the cottage again until the mystery, for such it appeared to her, was cleared up.

The cottage where the Comptons resided being on the road to Andover, Norman, who had become acquainted with Mr. Compton, generally called there in his way to Bridge House; but if he was aware of the coolness between Emily and Alice, he said nothing about it, nor did Emily mention it either to him or to Florence.

It happened, however, a few days afterwards, that

he heard something there respecting the quondam Mrs. Heaviside, which he did communicate, and whatever might have been the faults and follies of that silly woman, no one could help pitying her misfortunes.

It appeared that she had been induced by Captain Romer to marry him without having any settlement of her property made upon herself, so that everything was in his power—the infatuated widow having been persuaded that a settlement could be made as well after the marriage as before it, and that his motive for such delay was to keep the affair a secret from his uncle for a short time.

As soon as they were married they went to Paris, where for two or three weeks she was very gay and very happy; but even before the honeymoon was over, she began to have reasons for being dissatisfied with her dashing husband, whose conduct she had occasion to suspect was not of the most exemplary nature.

On their return to London, she soon learned that the prospective title with which he had dazzled her senses was a myth, and this terrible disappointment was speedily followed by the equally astounding discovery that he was involved in debt to an immense amount. Then came reproaches on the one hand, contempt and neglect on the other; and, at last, the unprincipled adventurer, having converted everything into money, disappeared, and his wretched wife was left almost penniless. In this miserable condition she wrote to her brother, who said in his rough, good-natured way, he was sorry for her, although it was no more than she deserved, and he supposed he must allow her something to live upon, as he could not have the comfort of his home interfered with, by having her to reside with him and his daughter.

CHAPTER XLI.

It wanted but two days to the wedding, and, at Norman's earnest request, Mr. Robertson had consented to perform the ceremony at the church of the village, near Bridge House, although he would have preferred that it should have taken place at his own church, and Norman would have yielded the point, but that Florence said she could not bear the idea of being made a public spectacle for all the gossips of Andover; therefore he had won over the good-natured rector to accede to her wishes, and marry them at the village in a quiet way.

Mrs. Robertson had promised to be present on the occasion, and the happy pair were to spend a fortnight in the Isle of Wight, the rector having said, laughingly,—

“You shall have a parson's week, Basset; that is, from Monday morning to Saturday week at night, for I cannot take more than one Sunday upon myself.”

However, he afterwards agreed to take two Sundays, provided he could get a deputy for the afternoon service; and so it was arranged that the

marriage should take place on the Thursday, and it was now Tuesday afternoon.

Emily was gone out to walk with her father. Poor Emily! she had done her best to appear cheerful amid the general joy, yet, in spite of all her efforts, the tears would now and then gush from her eyes when she was alone, as the thought would obtrude itself on her mind, "And it might have been my wedding-day too."

Florence had excused herself from walking out with Emily and Mr. Basset, on the plea of having a great many things to do; but Norman came in soon afterwards, and of course the things, whatever they were, remained undone. The happy lovers were sitting together by a window, that looked into the garden fronting the house, whence they could see any visitors approaching for a short distance along the London road.

The Inglebys were not expected till the next day, but they had sent down some very handsome presents for the occasion, and besides those intended for the bride, Emily had received from her sister a white dress and lace bonnet, with a pale blue silk mantle, and other pretty things befitting a bridesmaid, chosen with much good taste as becoming to her figure and complexion.

"Florence," said Norman, putting his arm fondly round her waist, "Florence, you are going to be a poor man's wife; does not your courage sometimes fail, when you think on the life that is before you?"

"If it did, Norman, I would not do you so great an injustice as to enter upon it, and I hope you have sufficient confidence in me to believe so."

"I have unlimited confidence in you, my own dearest love. What I said implied no want of reliance on you, but on myself. I mistrust my own power to make you happy."

"You may dismiss all fears on that account, love.

I mean to be happy, and I mean to do everything I can to make you so."

This declaration was gratefully acknowledged, and a conversation ensued, such as is only interesting to those engaged in it, which was at length interrupted by the sound of approaching carriage-wheels.

Now the short carriage-way leading to Bridge House branched from the high road, and went nowhere else, being terminated by the hedge-row of a field belonging to the Hill Farm; consequently any vehicle turning off the road at that point was sure to be coming to the house.

"It looks like a fly from the station," said Norman.

"Then it must be the Inglebys," Florence replied.

"Yet they were not expected till to-morrow."

They both rose, and awaited with some impatience the coming of the carriage, wondering whom it could possibly contain, until it stopped at the gate. The driver dismounted, and opened the door, when a gentleman alighted, whose face being partly concealed by the scarf wound round his neck, was not immediately recognised by Florence; but the instant he turned his eyes full upon the window, she saw who it was, and to Norman's utter astonishment, exclaimed, "My father!"

"He felt as if stunned by a sudden and violent blow. Was here then to be an end to all his long-cherished hopes, just as they were on the eve of completion? Yet what else could such a visit portend at such a moment? With one arm round the trembling girl, who really needed his support, he awaited the event in torturing suspense, pressing her still closer to his side, and thus they stood when Major Gilmour was shown into the room. He walked straight up to them with his usual stately step, and, taking his daughter's hand, kissed her cheek, with more tenderness in his manner than he had ever displayed before, on which Norman loosed his hold, and stood at a little distance.

"I see you are very much surprised," the major said to Florence, "and I should have given you some notice of my intention, but I only arrived in England yesterday, and was anxious, in consequence of what I heard from my solicitor this morning, to see you without delay. This is Mr. Norman Basset, I presume?"

Norman bowed in silence, as he was uncertain what sort of terms they were to be upon, while Florence, far too much agitated to speak, burst into tears. Her father, who was still holding her hand, then said to Norman, "Mr. Basset, my daughter and I have not met for some time, which may perhaps excuse any seeming want of courtesy if I request that you will give us leave for a few minutes——"

Norman bowed again respectfully, and withdrew without saying a word, and the father and daughter remained alone together.

Major Gilmour was not a man to make a scene, or to feel very sentimental under any circumstances, but his tones and looks were softer than usual as he said, "Florence, there has been unkindness between us, but let it be forgotten. I believe I was wrong, many circumstances have occurred to show me that I was so, but it is all past, and I should wish it to be thought of no more."

Florence, overcome by the unexpected kindness of this address, could not resist the impulse to throw herself into his arms, and he embraced her affectionately.

"My dear, dear father! this is such unlooked-for happiness—I can scarcely believe it is real."

"But I have been informed, Florence, you have other schemes of happiness in view. Is this true?"

"I had, sir, but they must now depend on you."

"If my information is correct, you have the intention of being married very shortly; that is why I hurried down here without apprising you of my return. When was the ceremony to take place?"

"The day after to-morrow," answered Florence, in a faint voice, pale and trembling with the intensity of her excitement.

"Then let it be so; I have no desire to prevent your marriage, or to cause any delay; but it is highly proper that I should be present, and I am glad it has so happened that I have arrived in time."

Florence hardly dared to give credit to the evidence of her own senses; for, happy as she was in the assurance of her father's restored favour, she had felt sure that his coming in so much haste was to throw obstacles in the way of her union, and, if not to prevent it altogether, at least to put it off for an uncertain period. Her grateful joy, therefore, at this concession was unbounded, and flowed from her lips in words of love and thankfulness.

"You will approve of Norman, sir, I am sure, when you know him, for he is one of the best and most noble-minded of men; everybody esteems and respects him."

Major Gilmour smiled as he replied,—

"I dare say he is perfect in your eyes, my love, but I shall reserve my opinion till I can have the opportunity of judging for myself. However, I am the more inclined to think well of him from what I have lately seen of his brother; for I met with Charles Basset in India."

"With Charles, sir? Is it possible?"

"Yes, I met with him in a very extraordinary manner; and I have brought a letter for his father, which, I suppose, will make me a welcome visitor here."

"It will, indeed. Poor Charles! I am so thankful; but what is he doing in India?"

"A great deal of good, I fancy. He is preaching Christianity among the heathens."

"A missionary?" said Florence.

"Yes, and a most zealous one they say. He appears to be highly respected, and is living very comfortably. I had a great deal of conversation with

him, and he has placed me under obligations of such a nature, that I shall be glad to repay them in some measure by any attention in my power to his family. In fact I owe to Charles Basset my escape from a terrible death. If it had not been for him, I should certainly have been murdered by a most atrocious gang of robbers. But it is a long story, and I cannot tell you about it now, for here comes Mr. Basset, and I must offer some apology for intruding upon him in this unceremonious way."

Mr. Basset was, as may be supposed, very much astonished at the sight of Major Gilmour, and was, at first, rather more polite than cordial in his reception of so unexpected a visitor; but soon finding that he was disposed to be extremely friendly, and seeing that Florence looked pleased and happy, he altered his manner, shook hands very heartily with the major, and said he was rejoiced to see him.

Emily, on hearing who was there, had gone in search of Norman, whom she found in a very perturbed state of mind, not knowing what the effect of this apparently ill-timed visit might be; and, of course, with the usual ingenuity of a lover, conjuring up to his imagination all the evils that could, by any possibility, arise from it.

"Norman, what can be the meaning of this?" said Emily; "was ever anything so unlucky?"

"I am afraid it is, indeed, Emmy. Have you seen him?"

"No; I shall hate the sight of him. What a pity he was not three days later."

"Where is my father?" asked Norman.

"In the parlour, with them."

"Then I will go back, for I cannot bear this suspense any longer; I must know what I have to hope or to fear."

"Poor Norman! not much to hope, I am afraid," said Emily, as her brother left the room. "It is

most unfortunate, and I am so sorry for Florence, too, it will be a dreadful disappointment."

Norman returned to the parlour, where he was surprised to find a group of much happier-looking faces than he had expected to see.

"And now I shall have the pleasure of introducing my son to you," said Mr. Basset, as Norman entered the room.

"And my son also," the major replied, rising and giving his hand kindly to Norman, whose handsome countenance was instantly suffused with a bright glow of surprise and delight, as he replied that he should indeed be proud of the title.

His fears thus happily removed, he was all animation, and in the joy of finding that his marriage was not even to be delayed, he never once thought of the very material change this day's occurrences had made in all his future prospects. He forgot that Florence was again an heiress, and that by marrying her with her father's consent he was securing a noble fortune for himself; he thought of nothing but that she was not to be taken from him, and he was supremely happy. After some further conversation, Major Gilmour said to Mr. Basset,—

"And now, my good friend, I have some intelligence to give you that I am sure will be acceptable. I have seen a gentleman in India you will be very glad to hear news of."

Mr. Basset clasped his hands together, and, raising his eyes to heaven, murmured, "My son."

"Is it so, sir?" said Norman, anxiously. "Have you really seen my brother?"

"Yes, I have, indeed, and not only seen him, but passed some time with him, and have brought letters; here they are." And he took the packet from his pocket.

"Now God be praised for all his mercies!" said the venerable father, the tears streaming down his

cheeks. "This is what I have prayed for day and night, and it has come at last. And my poor boy, Major Gilmour, is he well?"

"He desired me to assure you that he is well and happy; but you will see what he says himself—there is his letter;" and he gave it to Mr. Basset, who rose from his chair, but was too much agitated to leave the room without assistance.

"Give me your arm, Norman," he said, "I must read this alone."

Norman supported his trembling steps to his own apartment, and when they reached it he said,—

"Now leave me, my son, and come back in half an hour."

As soon as he was alone he fell on his knees, and relieved his over-excited feelings by pouring out his thanks to the Great Disposer of all human events, for this unexpected, this almost un hoped-for blessing. Then with somewhat more composure, and a heart overwhelmed with joy and gratitude, he sat down to read Charles's letter. In the meantime Major Gilmour spoke to Norman respecting the fortune he intended to give his daughter, and told him that he had instructed his lawyer to prepare certain deeds of settlement, and bring them down on the following day to be regularly signed and sealed; and he also intimated that, as he understood Mr. Robertson had the right of selling his benefice, and was thinking of doing so, he, Major Gilmour, had some thoughts of making a proposal for the purchase of the advowson, provided Norman should feel disposed to settle permanently in Hampshire; but this, he said, would be an after consideration. Great was the happiness that reigned over the family circle at Bridge House that evening. Major Gilmour related at full length all that had happened to him in India, dwelling especially on the services Charles Basset had rendered him, and the high estimation in which he seemed to be held. When he mentioned that Charles had

assumed the name of Villiers, an exclamation of surprise burst from all present, as every one was aware of the extraordinary interest Mr. Basset had taken in the letters signed with that name in the Magazine, which, it now appeared, were written by Charles himself.

"I never could account for my strange feelings about those letters," said Mr. Basset; "but it is accounted for now. The ways of Providence are wonderful, and far beyond our comprehension."

There was so much to be told and listened to, that it was late when the party separated for the night, and as a room had been prepared for Major Gilmour, he consented to sleep at Bridge House; but Norman, who had ridden over on one of Mr. Robertson's horses, returned to Andover.

The next day brought the Inglebys, and also the solicitor, whose cold, formal manners had so distressed Florence on a less happy occasion; but she found him exactly the same now; he was just as cold and sententious in drawing up the marriage-settlements of the rich heiress, as in advising the discarded daughter respecting the disposal of a few hundred pounds. They were to him equally matters of business, and he treated them in the same way.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE important morning at length arrived when Florence and Norman were to be united by those sacred ties that man is enjoined "not to put asunder," and although every precaution had been taken to keep the proceedings as secret as possible, it was known throughout the town of Andover that Mr. Robertson's handsome young curate was going to be married that morning, and a great many of the townsfolks had set off by break of day on an excursion to the village where the ceremony was to take place.

Many wonderful stories were in circulation respecting the return of the bride's father, who was supposed to be dead, from some unknown Eldorado, bringing with him riches beyond all human calculation; and these tales were embellished, according to the fancy of the narrator, with various strange and mysterious circumstances said to have happened in the foreign land from which he had come, and which seemed to have no particular locality. At eight o'clock the village-bells began to ring with loud and merry peals; the sun was shining splendidly, and everything looked as bright and beautiful as it ought to look on such a

happy occasion. Still there was one heart not so glad as the rest; one for whom the brilliant morning had no charms, to whom the joyous sounds of the tuneful bells gave no delight.

Emily had risen very early, for she could not sleep; and was standing at the open window listening in sadness and thinking of what might have been. She was looking over a field through which she had often walked to the Hill Farm with one who was no longer there; her eyes were pensively fixed on a narrow path by which he used to come, because it was a shorter way than round by the road, and she was thinking of the many times she had watched him bounding along that path with his light footstep, and springing over the gate at the end of it. In melancholy mood she still was gazing on the objects that recalled so many painful recollections, when suddenly she started and her heart beat with violent emotion, for a tall athletic form crossed that very pathway, which she felt almost certain must be Freshfield Ray himself. She had but caught a momentary glimpse of him as the high hedge instantly hid him from her sight, but his figure was too remarkable to be mistaken, and she kept her eyes fixed with intense eagerness on the spot where he had passed, in the hope of seeing him again. She did not move, she scarcely breathed, she pressed her hand on her beating heart as if to prevent it from bursting its bounds; and thus she stood for several minutes watching for the same apparition, yet half dreading that when it came again it might disappoint her expectations.

At length, at the farthest extremity of the path, from behind a clump of trees, the same figure emerged, and turning towards the farm-house, speedily vanished; but she had then seen him distinctly, and all doubt of his identity was removed. Surprise, hope, joy, and fear alternately took possession of her mind, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and feelings. The bells still rang on, but she did not hear

them; the minutes were passing rapidly away that ought to have been employed in preparing for the approaching ceremony, but she heeded them not; everything else was forgotten in the one all-absorbing thought that Freshfield Ray was at the farm, and that she had seen him.

Nearly an hour had elapsed, and she was still standing at the window in the same attitude, when Claudia came into her room.

"Emily, dear, are you not dressed? Mr. and Mrs. Robertson have been here some time, and everybody is quite ready. What can you have been about?"

Emily, thus awakened from her reverie, turned hastily from the window, and throwing her arms round her sister's neck, exclaimed, in a voice half choked with emotion,—

"Oh! Claudia. I have seen him,—I have seen Freshfield—he is come back——"

"Where did you see him?"

"In the field, just now. I am quite sure it was he,—I could not be mistaken."

"No, love; you were not mistaken, Mr. Ray is at the farm; and we all knew it yesterday, but were afraid to tell you."

"Afraid, Claudia! Why? Why should you say afraid? Ah! then—" and she burst into tears.

"Emily, Emily, compose yourself, and let me help you to dress. If I had supposed for a moment that you would have seen Mr. Ray I should have told you he was here; but we thought it better you should not know it till we were in the church."

"Is he to be there?"

"Yes, he is, dear; and you must summon all your courage to go through this morning well, at any rate, for it will be a trial for you."

"Then why did you not prepare me for it?"

"There were reasons, Emily, which you will know by and bye. You would not have been allowed to meet Mr. Ray without knowing that you were going to

meet him. Mr. Ingleby or Norman intended to tell you he would be there."

"But why is he to be there? Did Norman ask him to go?"

"No, he did not," replied Claudia, with some hesitation.

"Then I am sure there is something more in it than you will tell me. What is it, Claudia? Why am I not to know?"

"You will know soon enough, Emily. Let me dress you, now, as quickly as possible, for it is quite time you were ready."

Emily, with the aid of her sister, was very soon dressed, and she certainly did look very pretty, a fact of which she could not help being conscious, and it brought a brighter glow to her cheek, and caused a smile to hover round her lips; for, whatever might be the occasion of Freshfield's presence, there was a satisfaction in knowing that he would see how well she looked, even though it might be their last meeting. As soon as she was ready she went down stairs, and found the whole party assembled in the parlour, taking a slight repast of coffee and biscuits, as they were to return to breakfast.

Florence looked very beautiful, for her father, who was rather ostentatious in all that regarded appearance, had brought her a white mantle of the finest cashmere, lined with satin, and a long rich lace veil, which, with a wreath of orange blossom, she substituted for the bonnet she had intended to wear. He had also ordered three carriages from Basingstoke, and they were now waiting at the gate.

Mr. and Mrs. Robertson, with Norman, went in the first; Major Gilmour, with the bride and Claudia, in the second; and Mr. Basset, Emily, and Mr. Ingleby in the last. The drive to the church was a very short one, and very few people were met with by the way; but on entering the village it became evident that the whole place was in a state of excitement; men,

women, and children stood in groups at their doors, and followed the cavalcade, in rather noisy order or disorder to the churchyard, which was thronged with the excursionists from Andover, all eager to obtain a glimpse of the curate's bride; and as there was no carriage-way up to the porch, she had to walk some few yards through the crowd of gazers, to her no small annoyance. She leaned on the arm of her father, who did not dislike all this publicity, and returned the salutations of the people with the dignified air of a sovereign receiving the homage of his subjects, which had the effect of impressing every one with an immense idea of his importance. Mr. Basset took Claudia, and Mr. Ingleby followed with Emily. Not a word had been said about Freshfield during the ride, but as they walked up to the church door Mr. Ingleby took the opportunity of saying,—

“Now, Emily, you must show yourself a brave girl, as I am sure you are, for I believe there is to be another wedding here this morning.”

“Another wedding!” she echoed faintly; “any one we know?”

“Yes, my dear—two people that we all know very well.”

“Then he is going to be married, Mr. Ingleby, and you all knew it. Oh! why was I not told this?”

“We were afraid you would not come if we told you; but now you are here, you must behave like a heroine, and do credit to yourself and to us all. Remember, Emily, that all eyes will be upon you. Do not tremble so, child. You have always prided yourself on your spirit—now is the time to show it.”

“And I will show it!” she replied, with sudden determination; and as they were now entering the church, he could only say,—

“That is right.”

Strict orders had been given to admit no strangers, so that all was quiet enough within the sacred edifice, and Emily had time to collect her thoughts as they pro-

ceeded towards the vestry room, where the first object that met her eyes was Alice Compton, arrayed in white and holding in her hand a bride's bouquet composed of white flowers and orange blossoms. Here then was a solution of the mystery, and all her pride, all her resolution, came to her aid, as she said to herself,—

“It is cruel; it is insulting to choose this day, and in my presence.”

Alice, who was leaning on her father's arm, made a slight salutation to Emily, who returned it as slightly, but did not cast even a glance at Freshfield, although she knew he was standing directly opposite, and that his eyes were fixed upon her.

“He shall not see how much this costs me,” was her mental resolve, “I will not shed a tear; I will not show the least sign of regret. This day he becomes a husband, and from this day I will forget that I ever thought of him as mine.”

By a pardonable impulse of vanity, mingled perhaps with a degree of resentment, Emily placed herself in such a position that no one could look at her without seeing Alice at the same time, and her face flushed, for she knew that the contrast was great, and felt a pleasure in the thought that Freshfield could not be insensible to it.

The clergyman was now robed.

“I believe we have nothing to wait for,” he said, “we may as well proceed,” and he led the way to the altar, followed by the whole assemblage.

Norman was, of course, to be married first, and those who were to assist in the ceremony were placed in the proper order; Major Gilmour, who was to give away the bride, standing at her left hand, and Emily, as bridesmaid, next to him, her father being on the other side of her.

The ceremony was just commenced when a sudden ray of sunshine, bursting through one of the windows, cast the shadows in such a direction that they dis-

tinctly exhibited the grouping of the company, and in this "tableau," Emily saw that Freshfield was standing close behind her, on which she instinctively put her arm through that of her father to support herself and prevent her agitation from being remarked. At length all was concluded, Florence was the wife of Norman Basset, the clergyman had pronounced the blessing, and the happy pair were receiving the customary congratulations, when Freshfield Ray, who had remained near Emily, took her hand and bending down his head, said softly,—

"Emily, do you still love me?"

She drew her hand away from him, and her eyes, flashed with insulted pride, as she replied,—

"I should scarcely have expected such a question, sir, at such a moment as this. You are about to become a husband, and I hope you will be happy."

"That must depend on you, dearest Emily. I am here, indeed, in the hope of becoming a husband, if you will deign to give me a right to that title; but it is to you alone I look for it."

She trembled more than ever; she looked up in his face doubtingly, and beheld there an expression of truthfulness and unabated affection that could not be mistrusted. Again he took her hand, which was not withdrawn as before, and said,—

"Will you promise me, Emily, under this sacred roof, and in the presence of all who are dearest to you, never again to trifle with my affections as you have done?"

She could not speak, but, smiling through her tears, her eyes gave him the promise he required.

"Then," he continued, "if you can say this in all sincerity and truth, give me now, this moment, the best proof of your love. This was to have been our wedding-day, Emily; let it be so."

"Oh, no! Freshfield; not now—this is so sudden—so unexpected—it cannot be now."

"But why not, love? Everything is prepared; I

have a licence ; your father has given his consent that it shall be so ; and they all expect it ; for, you must forgive me, dearest, it was a concerted plan."

"Then they all knew it——"

"Yes, all."

"And Alice Compton?"

"Has come to be your bridesmaid ; she has been a true friend to us both."

"Dear Alice ! How much I have wronged her."

"We must make her amends," said Freshfield, smiling. "And now, my own Emily, make me as happy as Miss Gilmour has just made your brother."

Still she hesitated, and Freshfield made a sign to Mr. Basset, who came to them.

"I must entreat your assistance here, sir, or I shall have to leave the church a disappointed bachelor after all."

"My dear child," said Mr. Basset to Emily, "you have already trifled too much both with your own happiness and that of one who, I believe, merits your highest regard. If you feel that you can be happy with Mr. Ray, let the clergyman do his part now, and join you together in the sight of God, and with the blessing of your father ; but if you are doubtful——"

"I am not doubtful," said the happy girl, blushing deeply.

"Then, my dear, make this a joyful day for us all, and I think you will never have cause to repent it." At this moment they were joined by Mr. Ingleby,—

"Well, good folks," he said, "are we to have another wedding to-day, or not ? You must make up your minds quickly, for Mr. Robertson is impatient to know whether he has anything more to do. I fancy he wants his breakfast."

Freshfield looked at Emily, who cast down her eyes, and said nothing.

"Oh ! I see I may call him," said Mr. Ingleby, and

in another minute all were again ranged before the altar. Then Alice came up to Emily, and put the bridal bouquet into her hand, saying,—

“It was intended for you, dear Emily, and I hope it will be the means of making us friends for ever.

CHAPTER XLIII.

To account for the appearance of Mr. Ray on this auspicious morning, we must go back to the time when, with disappointed hopes and heart half broken, he left his home to wander about alone and miserable, amid new scenes and strange faces, without a joy, present or in prospect, to cheer his solitary way.

The day before his departure he went to take leave of Alice Compton, for whom he had really a great regard, and who had been in some measure the innocent cause of the unfortunate disagreement that had driven him to such extremities. He told her, without reserve, all that had passed between him and Emily, and she was very much grieved that Emily had been so unjust towards herself.

"She could not mean it seriously, Mr. Ray," she said, "and if she did, you must allow it was no proof of indifference towards you."

"It was a proof, Miss Compton, of her indifference to the pain she knew she was giving me; but if this had been all I might have borne it."

Alice said all she could in excuse for Emily, and exerted her best endeavours to convince him that her

coldness was affected, and that he had no rival in Ensign Claverton ; but he shook his head mistrustfully and said,—

“ The effect is the same, whether real or pretended. I could not bear to see my wife listening with pleasure to the flatteries of every coxcomb that chose to offer them ; it would make me wretched ; and I believe that a woman who can do this can never love any man sincerely.”

“ You will let your friends know where you are, Mr. Ray ? ”

“ I have no friends who will care much about it, Miss Compton, except perhaps Mr. Ingleby ; and as he is now so nearly allied to the family, I am not sure that, under the circumstances, he would desire that I should correspond with him.”

“ I shall be sorry not to hear of you,” said Alice, with the utmost simplicity.

“ Then allow me to write sometimes to you.”

“ Oh, yes ; if you will take so much trouble, I shall be greatly pleased.”

“ And will you answer my letters ? ”

“ Yes, if you wish it ; ” replied Alice, secretly delighted at the opportunity she saw might be afforded by such a correspondence, of bringing about a reconciliation in course of time.

Freshfield was entirely free from that conceit which would have made most men attribute the ready consent of the generous, warm-hearted girl to open a correspondence with him, to other motives than those by which she was really actuated ; but whatever might be her secret feelings with regard to Mr. Ray, her mind was bent upon restoring, if possible, a good understanding between the lovers.

Freshfield took his leave somewhat comforted by the assurance that he should now and then hear of one whom he was going away for the express purpose of trying to forget, a strange inconsistency, which it would be in vain to endeavour to account for, nor is

there much necessity so to do, since everybody understands it.

It was not long before Alice received a letter from Ireland describing some of the beauties of that interesting and highly picturesque country; but the tone of the writer was melancholy, and it was evident he derived but little enjoyment from the scenes he spoke of with admiration, but in the spirit of a man whose mind is ill at ease. Alice replied in a manner that induced him very soon to write again, and in short a week seldom passed in which letters were not exchanged between them.

Emily saw Alice very frequently; but she never had the slightest suspicion of the communication that was kept up between her confidential friend and her absent lover; and if Alice betrayed the confidence reposed in her, she deserved to be pardoned for such breach of trust on account of her amiable motives, and the desirable end she had in view. Freshfield thus knew that Emily was grieved at his absence, and wished for his return; he knew that she thought more highly of him than his modesty had ever allowed him to suppose she did, and by degrees, his prudent resolution gave way to anticipations of a more pleasing nature.

As the time approached for the marriage of Norman and Florence, he began to feel an ardent desire to return, and in a letter to Alice he said, that "If he were sure of being kindly received he thought he would venture to seek a reconciliation." The answer was so encouraging that he wrote immediately to Mr. Ingleby in confidence, begging for his opinion and advice on the subject, and it was that gentleman who projected and arranged the whole plan of surprising Emily by an unexpected wedding-day. Alice had good-naturedly entered into the plot, by consenting to appear as the bride elect, and this was the reason of that alteration in her conduct towards Emily which had produced the misunderstanding between them.

Mr. Basset had been kept in ignorance of what was going forward until the bridal morning, when he was enlightened by Mr. Ingleby, and was not displeased to find that Freshfield was to be his son-in-law after all.

The happy party, now all supremely happy, after the conclusion of the double ceremony, returned to Bridge House, where Peggy, in all the glories of a new gown, and a cap decorated with white ribbons, had been busy in superintending the arrangements of the breakfast-table, and great was the astonishment and joy of the good old creature to behold Mr. Ray among the company, and to hear that Miss Emily was married. Amid all the confusion and excitement of this eventful morning, another delightful surprise awaited Emily, who found that she and her husband were to go with Norman and Florence to the Isle of Wight, and that everything she would require for the journey had been prepared by her sister, and was packed in a large travelling trunk, of which Claudia gave her the key.

“But my father, Claudia; he cannot be left alone.”

“I shall stay with him, Emmy, till you return. It will only be a fortnight, and the farm will then be ready for you.”

“How kind you all are to me, and how little I have deserved it.”

“But you mean to deserve it in future, dear; and to recompense Mr. Ray for all you have made him suffer.”

“Yes, he shall never have reason to complain of me again. Oh! Claudia, I am so happy.”

“I know you are, Emily, and I hope you will always be so.”

“I am sure it will be my own fault if I am not. You will write to Charles to-day?”

“Certainly I shall, and my father will write also.”

“Beg of him to come home, Claudia; tell him how

happy it would make us all, and how comfortably he might live amongst us."

"I shall say everyting I can to induce him to return, Emmy, for I wish it as much as you do."

This conversation took place while Emily was changing her bridal attire for the dress in which she was to travel, and when this alteration was completed, she once more affectionately embraced her sister, and thanked her for all she had done. Florence was by this time ready, and the two travelling-carriages were at the gate. Then came the leave-taking, and all the bustle and business of departure, and at length the last adieu was said, and the carriages drove away towards Southampton. Mr. and Mrs. Robertson went soon afterwards, taking with them Mr. Compton and Alice, but Major Gilmour and Mr. Ingleby agreed to remain till the next day, when they proposed to return to town together.

Claudia and Mr. Basset devoted the rest of the day to writing long letters to Charles, which Major Gilmour undertook to send through a channel that would ensure their being forwarded to Chundelee without the delay that might occur if they were sent in the ordinary way.

CHAPTER XLIV.

NEARLY a year had elapsed since the events last recorded, a year of almost unalloyed happiness to those chiefly concerned in this narrative. Norman Basset was now rector of the new church at Andover, in the place of Mr. Robertson, who had retired and gone to reside in another part of the country; Freshfield Ray, surrounded with all the comforts of domestic peace and love, was as happy as man can look to be in this world; and Mr. Ingleby, who was now the father of a fine healthy boy, had never for one instant repented of having ventured to take a ticket in the great lottery of life where, notwithstanding all that ill-natured people may say about it, the prizes are far more numerous than the blanks, though there may be many a one who does not estimate his or her prize at its true value. Major Gilmour very often paid a visit to the rectory, and was really proud of his son-in-law, who was now held in high consideration, and visited by all the principal families of the county.

The only drawback to the general happiness was the gradual but certain decline of Mr. Basset, who

was growing weaker every day, and whose hollow cheek, sunken eye, and enfeebled frame were evident tokens to all around him that his days were numbered, and he had not long to sojourn upon the earth. He was now entirely at the farm, where the kind attentions of Freshfield and the affectionate care of Emily cheered his last days, and smoothed the path that had brought him within sight of the tomb.

For some weeks Freshfield had every day carried him down stairs in his arms, for he liked the change from one room to another, but this had now become too great a fatigue for him, and all he could bear was to be removed from the bed to a large arm-chair by the window, where, propped up with pillows, he could sit and look out over the farm-yard, which was an amusement to him.

He knew that the end of his journey was near, for no one attempted to deceive him on that point, nor did he wish they should, for he was patient and resigned, spoke calmly of the coming change, and often said that, but for one cause of regret, this last year of his existence would have been the happiest of his whole life, since it had left him but one wish ungratified. Death is no foe to be shunned with horror when he comes with gentle steps at his fitting season, but is rather a friend to whom we should look for peace and repose, after a long journey which, be the path rugged or smooth, must come to an end at last; and why should we shut our eyes to the truth, and travel on as if we expected our career to be interminable?

Emily seldom left him, and Freshfield would spend whole hours in his room, sitting by his side either reading aloud, or talking cheerfully, and soothing him with all the gentle attentions that could be paid by the most affectionate son. Mr. Basset was very fond of him, and often would put his thin trembling

fingers into the large strong hand of the kind-hearted young man, and murmur a blessing upon him.

Norman came every day, and usually spent some time in reading to, or praying with him, giving him all the consolation that it is the part of one of God's ministers to afford to the dying Christian; and the venerable parent found in the pious and dutiful affection of this excellent son the best and holiest comfort that an old man on the verge of the grave can experience. Claudia, too, came frequently to stay with her father for several days together, and, at length, when it seemed that his life was drawing near towards its close, she would not leave him, but wrote to her husband, saying that she should remain as long as her presence was needful to his comfort. Her child and its nurse were lodged in a neighbouring cottage, and the little boy was brought for a few minutes every day to his grandfather, who took great delight in this his only grandchild, his wan countenance lighting up with joy if the infant smiled at him, or seemed pleased with his notice.

One morning Claudia was sitting by his bedside before he had risen, when he said to her,—

“Claudia, my child, I do not feel as usual this morning.”

“What is it, dear father; are you not so well?”

“I hardly know what it is, but there is a strange sensation at my heart. I think I shall not be with you long now; but God's will be done.”

“Nay, you are out of spirits; this dull morning has depressed you; but see, the sun is breaking out now; you shall get up, and then you will feel revived.”

He smiled faintly, and put out his hand that she might take it in hers,—

“I have been a favoured man, Claudia. Every seeming evil that I have met with has turned to

good. I have been spared to rejoice in the prosperity of my children, and I am truly grateful for all the mercies that have been bestowed on me. Heaven has granted all my prayers but one. Oh! that this had been vouchsafed to me also."

"There is still hope, dearest father, that it may yet be so."

"Ah! no," said the dying man. "It is too late; but tell him, Claudia, that my last thought was on him; tell him that I blessed him with my dying breath, and that I trust we shall meet again in that world to which I am going."

"Not yet, my father—not yet—and, perhaps——"

"No, love, the hope is past; a few hours, and my eyes will be closed for ever; but get me up. I should like to look out upon the world once more. Get me up, dear, and move me to the window."

She tried to raise him, but could not, for he was quite unable to assist himself in the least.

"I think we must have Freshfield to lift you," she said; "he will do it more easily than I shall."

And at this moment Freshfield came into the room, and, leaning over the bed, spoke to the invalid as gently as if he had been speaking to an infant.

He wrapped him in his flannel dressing-gown, and taking him in his arms as easily as he would have lifted a little child, placed him carefully in the great arm-chair by the window, whilst Claudia arranged his pillows, and put an ottoman for his feet to rest upon.

"I should like a cup of tea," he said, "and Freshfield will stay with me while you make it."

Claudia left the room for that purpose, and, in going down the stairs, heard a strange voice in the dining-room, and fancied it was mingled with the sound of suppressed sobs. She paused for a moment to listen, and then she heard Emily speak as if she was greatly excited, and again distinguished the

voice that had first arrested her attention," which she no longer mistook for that of a stranger.

Springing forward like lightning, she entered the room, and was instantly folded in the arms of her brother Charles.

"Oh! thank God for this happiness," she exclaimed. "Thank God you are not too late. He will see you once again."

"Once again, do you say? Is it then so near?"

"I am afraid so, indeed; there is a great change. We must not think of ourselves now, Charles. No time must be lost in letting him know you are here."

"Will he be able to see me?"

"Oh! yes. It is what he has been praying for most fervently; he was talking of you this moment, just before I left the room. Emily, pray try to compose yourself, dear; go and ask for a cup of tea, and I will take it up stairs."

Emily endeavoured to subdue her emotion; but her mind was so much agitated by the contending feelings of joy at the return of her brother, and grief for the immediate danger of her father, that it was in vain she struggled to regain even a moderate degree of composure. The arrival of Charles was not wholly unexpected, for Claudia had written again to him, representing her father's infirm state of health, and his anxious desire to see his absent son once more before he died; to which Charles had replied that he would, if possible, revisit England for a short time in the autumn, but not with any intention of remaining, as nothing, he said, would now induce him to abandon the cause to which he had devoted himself. He had spoken with the most generous feeling of his brother's marriage, not making the slightest allusion to his own former hopes, with which Norman was entirely unacquainted, for even Emily had carefully abstained from saying anything that might give

him the painful impression that he was his brother's rival.

Norman had, on the preceding evening, thought he observed a change in his father, which made him so uneasy, that he proposed to Florence that they should both ride over to the farm early in the morning, and they breakfasted much earlier than usual for that purpose. While Emily was gone to make a cup of tea for her father, they arrived, and walked into the dining-room, without knowing who was there, and for a moment Norman supposed it was the doctor, and asked how his father was.

"Norman," said Charles, "have you forgotten me?"

"Charles! my dear brother—is it indeed you?" And they embraced each other with cordial affection.

Charles then turned to Florence with that quiet unruffled demeanour that had become habitual to him, and as he took the hand that was freely extended to him, he showed no sign of any deeper emotion than that of pleasure at the meeting. She bade him welcome with all the warmth and frankness of sisterly regard; and afterwards, in communing with his own heart, he said to himself,—

"Yes, I am satisfied. Providence has been graciously pleased to make me the means of restoring my brother to that height from which he was precipitated by my misdeeds; this is another proof that my atonement is acceptable in the sight of Heaven, and that the path I am following is blessed."

Emily soon returned with the tea, which Claudia carried up to her father, and when he had taken it she made a sign to Freshfield, who followed her out of the room.

"Charles is come," she said softly, "but we must break it to him by degrees. Norman will be the best to do it, and he is here too."

"Freshfield," said the sick man, in a feeble tone, "why do you go away? I want you to stay with me."

"Go down then, and send Norman," said Freshfield hurriedly to Claudia.

"I am not going away, sir," he added, going back into the room; "but Mr. Norman is here, and is coming up to see you."

"Is he? I am glad of that; I was afraid I should not see him again. My time is come, Freshfield; and I am ready."

He put his wasted hands together as if in mental prayer, and at that moment Norman entered. He made a sign to Freshfield, who instantly left the room, when Norman went round to the other side of his father's chair, and stood there.

"I am so glad you are come, Norman; very glad. You must not leave me again; my time is short: I shall now have you all with me to the last—all but one."

"And why not all, my father?" said Norman, bending down his head, and speaking very gently.

"It is too late, my son; I feel that my last hour is come."

"Yet it is not too late, dearest father, all may be with you still."

The dying man raised his eyes eagerly to Norman's face, and a gleam of hope and joy flitted across his pallid countenance,—

"He is here, then, Norman; Charles is here."

"And if he were, do you think you would be able to see him?"

"Then it is so: oh! God, I thank thee! But why does he not come to me? Let me see him before my eyes are closed for ever."

Charles, who was waiting at the door for Norman's signal, heard these words, and the next moment was kneeling at his father's feet. The enfeebled arms

were instantly clasped round his neck, the drooping head was laid on his shoulder.

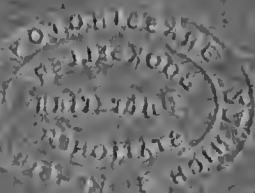
“Now God be praised! My prayers are heard. I depart in peace. Charles, my beloved son—I die happy!”

The last words were uttered very faintly; Charles folded his arms closer round him—but life was gone.

THE END.







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